

Allen Wold

BELOW THE THRESHOLD



Below the edge
of hearing,
below the limits
of vision.

FIRST PUBLICATION IN ANY FORM

File One: Monday Evening

The phone started ringing just as Dr. Jack Page settled down with a double Laphroaig before fixing himself some supper. With a sigh he put down his drink, careful not to spill any on his black-gloved false left hand, got out of his recliner and picked up the phone on the third ring.

“Page here,” he said.

“Dr. Page, this is Emily Velasquez. I’m sorry to disturb you but look, could we talk this evening?”

“Let me check,” he said, and took from his shirt pocket the slim appointment book he always carried. He’d love to talk with Emily, any time, but her tone of voice had implied she needed him as her therapist, rather than—otherwise. “I’m free right now,” he said when he found the right page. Emily had no idea of his interest in her, of course. He was too professional for that. “Want to tell me about it?”

“I’m frightened, Dr. Page,” she said. “Maybe I’m just imagining things again, maybe it’s just the dream I had last night, but even if that’s true, I’m frightened, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Now take it easy, Emily, try to calm down. I haven’t had supper yet, do you want to meet me at my office, say about eight?”

“Please, Doctor, I can’t stand it. I’ve got to know if what I saw was real or not. If I just invented it, okay, that’s bad enough, I thought I was getting better—”

“You are, Emily, you know that.”

“Yes, but then maybe it’s real, maybe—and I was right there, and I didn’t even know it, right there with them.” “With who, Emily, slow down and tell me what happened.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Page, I—I don’t want to talk about it on the phone. I think I’ve stumbled onto some kind of conspiracy.”

“You want me to come over there?”

"No, not here, they may be watching— God, I sound paranoid, don't I?"

“You do, and that's not like you. All right, come down to the office, we'll try to work this out.”

“No, you haven't eaten yet, how about the Escapades, dinner on me.”

Jack sighed. He was not in the habit of accepting meals from his patients, though if Emily had just asked him, instead of presenting him with this inarticulate story, he would have been sorely tempted. As it was. . . . “Can you tell me anything about it at all?”

“I'm sorry,” she went on. “I can't explain, I have to— Maybe it's all in my mind, but if it's real, it could be important, and I might be in danger. I have to show you something. Then you can tell me what I should do next—go to the police, take a tranquilizer, whatever.”

“All right,” Dr. Page said. “When shall I meet you?” “Seven thirty? Will that be all right?”

“That will be fine. I'll see you then.”

File Two: Monday Evening

Jack Page drove up Garfield through downtown Freeport, toward the Escapades restaurant and his meeting with Emily Velasquez. The traffic was light, putting no strain on his artificial left hand. Encased in a black glove, it easily gripped the steering wheel in between the mechanical thumb and the rigid but naturally curved fingers.

He turned right onto Clyne, doing most of the work with his right hand. The neighborhood here was a bit rougher, and the hookers, he noticed, were already out, though it wasn't yet seven thirty.

Emily had been seeing him for a year now, and he had thought that she was making progress in dealing with her schizophrenic tendencies. The phone call had not been like her at all, and had any of his other clients called him with a story like that, he would have insisted on a regular office visit. But Emily was different. Clinical psychologists and their patients should not develop relationships outside the office, but . . .

He turned left up Wade Avenue. Emily had better have a good reason for this meeting, he thought. But then, he had to admit that it was he who had yielded to temptation. In fact, if he could face the truth, he was falling in love with her. And that, he knew, was interfering with his objectivity in this case.

After another block he saw the restaurant ahead, and made a sharp left into its parking lot. He had to use the spinner on his wheel. His false left hand, as good as it was, could not grip the steering wheel strongly enough to make the turn unaided. The hand—and the arm above it to halfway between his elbow and his shoulder was a compromise between a more powerful but fully artificial metal hook, which might have disturbed his clients, and a purely cosmetic but totally useless plastic hand. He stopped by the attendant's booth between the restaurant and the parking lot, got out, and gave his keys to the young man on duty.

The main entrance of the Escapades was directly opposite the parking lot booth. Jack adjusted his turtleneck shirt and went in. There were several other people in the little lounge area, but no Emily. When the Maitre d' came over, Jack asked him about her.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the man said. “We have no reservation in the name of Velasquez.”

“I guess I’m a little early,” Jack said. “Can you give me a table, and tell her Dr. Page is here when she comes in?” “Certainly, Dr. Page. Please come this way.”

He was led to a small table at the back. When the waiter came over a moment later Jack ordered a Laphroaig on the rocks, and was gratified when the waiter knew what that was. Another moment later and he had the fine unblended scotch whisky and took a sip.

All right, he told himself, maybe he was overstepping his professional bounds a bit by coming here, but dammit, that phone call of Emily’s was not a part of her usual pattern. Either there was something real to worry about, or she was developing a new psychosis. In either case, it was best to get to the bottom of it at once.

Though his conversation with her had been brief, the sudden expression of paranoia she had exhibited was not uncommon these days. Indeed, many of his clients came to him for just that reason. Ever since the Visitors had come, three years ago, a large portion of the population had developed exaggerated fears about what the Visitors were and what they were up to.

That there was cause for concern only complicated the issue. Almost everybody had second-hand experience with Visitor violence, and many had felt the impact first hand, even here in Freeport. This was one of the few cities in the south, the zone in which Visitors could live without fear of the red dust, and which was, at the same time, completely controlled by humans. Oh, there were those “naturalized” Visitors, of course, ex-fifth columnists who, known as such to their own people, had come to this human-controlled city for refuge.

But it was one thing to be concerned about the realities of the Visitor’s presence, and another to be unable to separate imaginary fears from the truth. It was Jack’s self-imposed task to help those who could not do so, to enable them to be able to come to terms with Visitor influence and presence, even with Northampton so near across the bay. The human mind frequently over-reacted to the sudden strange, the alien, and the unknown. For many of Jack’s clients, this was keeping them from coping with the day-to-day world.

His glass was empty. It was ten minutes to eight. He signaled the waiter, ordered

another, and asked the man to check to see if Emily had come in yet. After a few moments the waiter returned and said that she had not.

Emily might be schizophrenic, but she'd never before exhibited any of the Alien Anxiety Syndrome, as Jack called it. What had she said on the phone? Something about being afraid, a conspiracy, wanting to show Jack something, about 'being there with them,' whatever that meant.

He wished he'd been able to draw her out more. From any of his other AAS clients, he'd just assume an intensification of their paranoia, but Emily didn't fit in with that syndrome.

It was especially disturbing since, during the last month or so, many of his AAS patients had seemed to be getting a lot better. In itself, that should have been encouraging, but there were too many of them, and it was happening too quickly, as if they all shared a common disease which had run its course. Except that psychological problems didn't work that way. He was sure there was a pattern there, though there was nothing yet he could put his finger on.

And Emily was going counter to that pattern.

The waiter came back and asked him if he'd like to order yet.

"I'd like to wait a bit longer," Jack said, "in case she's just gotten hung up in traffic somewhere."

"Another drink, then?"

"I'd better not." He showed the waiter his artificial hand. "I have a hard enough time driving as it is," he said. The waiter nodded and went off.

It was now after eight. Emily, Jack thought, might be schizophrenic, and might even be developing a latent paranoia, but her strange call to him was more than a little worrying. He noticed the Maitre d' standing beside his table. "Miss Velasquez has not come in yet," the man said. "Are you sure you were to meet her here, at this time?" "Quite sure," Jack said. He could see, beyond the Maitre d' people standing in the lounge. "Maybe I'd better wait in the bar."

"That might be best," the Maitre d' said, and as soon as Jack got up from the table a busboy came over to make it ready for a paying customer.

The bar was opposite the lounge from the dining room. Jack went into the darkened room and looked for a seat at the counter. He saw an acquaintance with an empty stool next to him, so he went over.

“Lewis,” he said to the naturalized Visitor, “Naturals” as they were called in Freeport. “May I join you?” “Hey, Jack, sure, sit down.” He appeared to be in his late twenties, with a strong face and short, light brown hair and wearing chinos and a sport shirt, to contrast with the rest of the customers. “How are things doing?”

“Not bad. And yourself?” Jack had known Lewis for almost two years now, and though they didn’t often socialize, he had always liked the alien.

“Doing real well,” Lewis was saying. “Not much excitement, of course, but then I prefer it that way.” “Don’t we all,” Jack said as the bartender came up. Jack decided that he could handle a third Laphroaig, and Lewis ordered a refill on his red wine.

“You don’t look too cheerful,” Lewis observed.

“It appears I’ve been stood up,” Jack said. “You come in here often?”

“Every now and then. It’s expensive, but then, what can a Natural spend his money on, even here in Freeport? I can’t get a driver’s licence, so I don’t need a car. Don’t have enough to buy a house, and the better apartment buildings won’t rent to Naturals. Nothing to save my money for, so I might as well spend it.”

“How can you eat the food here?”

“Oysters,” Lewis said with a grin. “And at the Golden Carnation, sushi.”

“I guess that’ll waste your paycheck,” Jack murmured. “You don’t like to spend money on food?”

“Nothing to show for it but an increased waistline. I wouldn’t come here except the person I was supposed to meet offered to pay.”

“That’s too bad. I wouldn’t mind a few nicer things, but what the hell, I really like to eat. But you know, things are beginning to loosen up a bit lately. Clerks will wait on me now, more often than not. Of course, the hassles here are nothing

like they are in say New York, or Chicago, or Sacramento. Freeport's a good place for Naturals, relatively speaking."

"It would drive me up the wall," Jack said. "Freeport's about the only place where a Natural can hold a regular job. So what if I'm only the head janitor in a rattail building, I'm working."

"There's Northampton, where your people are in control—"

"I'd be executed as a fifth columnist. No thanks. I never was very deep into it but as far as Northampton and the rest of my people are concerned, I'm a traitor. I'll stay here, where I'm at least free."

Jack wasn't really listening. He was watching the LEDs on his watch tick off the seconds and minutes. It was now eight thirty, and Emily still hadn't come in. He caught the bartender's eye and asked for a phone. Lewis stopped talking while Jack dialed Emily's home number. There was no answer.

"Not that you don't have my sympathy," Lewis said as Jack hung up, "but I don't even have the opportunity to be stood up."

"Surely you know some naturalized women," Jack said.

"A few, but how many are there in Freeport? That don't already have some sort of relationship, that is. I think that's probably the hardest thing for me to deal with."

"Believe me, Lewis, I know exactly how you feel." He flexed his artificial hand.

"So who is this ungrateful wench?" Lewis asked, keeping it light.

"One of my clients, actually."

"I thought you weren't supposed to get involved with them."

"I'm not. And I'm not tonight, either, she wanted to talk to me professionally."

"But you like her a lot, anyway."

"That I do, though I've never done or said anything about it."

“So who is she?”

“An interior designer. She’s fairly successful. And an awfully nice person. I have to admit that lately I’ve been having difficulty keeping my attraction for her separate from my professional interest. That’s not uncommon, of course.”

“Can you do anything about it? Or do your professional ethics forbid any romantic entanglement whatsoever?”

“Well, I can’t be both her doctor and her lover. What I should do is tell her about things, and let her find another therapist. But . . .” he flexed his artificial hand again.

“You’re afraid to tell her how you feel,” Lewis said. “Is that because of your professional concern, or because of your artificial arm?”

“That’s what I’m not sure about. Now, tonight has nothing to do with romance. She asked me here as her therapist. Which is why I’m not being quite as frank with you as I might be, though I’m probably saying more than I should.”

“Jack, you’re the psychologist, but you’re too close to this. If you could hear your voice, you’d know that you’ve got to come to some kind of an understanding with yourself.”

“I know that,” Jack said laughing. “Only, knowing doesn’t make it any easier. But thanks for telling me anyway. I’ve been reluctant to admit my feelings, even to myself.”

“About your arm.”

“About—yes, dammit, about my arm. Hell, Viet Nam was a long time ago. I thought I’d learned to accept it. I don’t have nightmares anymore, I don’t have ghost arm aches anymore.” He finished his scotch. “But I guess I’m not adjusted after all.”

“Has your friend ever shown any aversion to your arm?” Lewis asked gently.

“No. But dammit, that’s my problem, not hers.”

He tossed down the last of his scotch. The question right now was, where was

Emily? She had said something at her last session with him about a big contract she was hoping to get. Maybe, he thought, she's gotten tied up at the office. The phone was still on the bar, so he called her there.

He got only the answering machine. He left a brief message and hung up. Maybe she'd gone to see her client. But she had sounded so urgent on the phone earlier that he couldn't believe that.

"Is she often late for appointments?" Lewis asked. "Never. She's usually very prompt, very meticulous about things, a bit too much so, perhaps."

"Maybe she's really in trouble."

"I'm beginning to suspect she is." He called the bartender over and asked for his bill from the dining room. "I think I'd better do some checking," he told Lewis. "She could have had an accident somewhere."

The bartender brought his bill, and Jack paid. On his way out he spoke to the Maitre d', giving him a tip and asking him to give Emily a message if she should come in after all.

He pulled out of the Escapades' parking lot and drove south to Marlin, then west toward Emily's address. He'd never been to her apartment before, but he knew it was in one of the newer apartment buildings just outside the business district. There was no street parking when he got there, but the underground lot had spaces for visitors, so he pulled in and took the elevator straight up to Emily's floor.

He knew her apartment number from his records. Her door was slightly ajar. He rang the bell, and felt a surge of relief when, after a moment, he heard someone coming.

The relief was turned to disappointment when a man opened the door. Emily had never said anything about a boyfriend. The man, dark and slender, smiled at him in a friendly way.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Jack said, "but I'm looking for Emily Velasquez."

The man spread his hands in a kind of a shrug. "I can't help you," he said. "Do you have the right apartment?" "I think so," Jack answered, and looked over the

man's shoulder at the number on the door.

"Maybe another floor," the man said with a quick grin. "The halls in this building are all the same, you know."

"I guess I must have made a mistake," Jack said, feeling an alarm bell going off inside his head.

"No problem," the man said, and firmly shut the door.

Jack stood there for a moment. He was sure this was the right apartment. He started to reach for the bell again, and then thought better of it. Instead, he went back to the elevator and took it down to the lobby.

He went over to the mailboxes and found Emily's name. The apartment number was the one he'd just visited. Thoroughly alarmed, he went to the phone in an alcove off to the side. The man in Emily's apartment could be a burglar, or worse, else why deny that it was Emily's place? Jack turned to the front of the phone book and found the number of the police.

He reported a suspected burglary in progress, and the police said they'd send a car right over. But when he hung up, Jack wondered if that were really the case. A strange intruder, right after Emily's concern for some kind of a conspiracy, was a bit too much of a coincidence. Jack didn't believe in conspiracies, but this was not the time to argue about it.

Knowing how inefficient the Freeport police were, Jack was surprised when two officers entered the lobby after only a few minutes. Jack went up to them at once.

"Are you the one who called in the burglary?" the black officer asked.

"Suspected burglary," Jack said, and told them what had happened as he walked with them toward the elevators.

"Good reason to be suspicious," the white officer said. Instead of going up, they turned down a side corridor to a door marked "Night Manager." There they identified themselves, stated the problem briefly, and asked the man to accompany them and bring the pass key. The manager, a craggy gray haired man, complied with obvious concern. Then they all went up to Emily's floor

together.

Jack led them to the door where the officers instructed him and the manager to stand to one side. The black officer rang the bell. There was no answer. He rang again. Still no answer. He knocked, called out Emily's name. There was no response at all.

The white officer nodded to the manager who came up and unlocked the door, then stepped aside to let the police be the first to enter. He and Jack followed the two officers inside.

Lights were on, though there was nobody home. The place had obviously been searched, and rather thoroughly. Every drawer and closet had been opened, furniture moved and sometimes overturned. The officers told Jack and the manager to stay where they were and made a quick tour of the apartment, guns drawn.

When they came back they asked Jack to describe the man he'd seen. They asked the manager about Emily, known visitors, and known habits, but he was of little help. Then they ushered Jack and the manager out of the apartment. While the white officer remained behind, the black officer escorted them down to the lobby again, so he could call in a report from his squad car.

On the way down the officer took Jack's name, address, phone, and inquired about his relationship with Emily.

"Can you let me know when you find anything out?" Jack asked as they walked through the lobby to the front door. "She may need some emergency therapy as a consequence of this."

"There should be no problem about that," the officer said.

"There's something else," Jack said, as they went out to the street and over to the patrol car. "I don't know if there's any connection, but there might be." He then told the officer about the phone call he'd received from Emily.

"We'll check it out," the officer said. He reached into the car and took out the microphone.

There was nothing more for Jack to do.

File Three: Tuesday Morning

Jack got to his office shortly before nine the next morning. His secretary, Mrs. McKinley, had coffee waiting as usual.

“Your first appointment’s at ten,” she said, handing him a cup.

“Fine. Has Miss Velasquez called?”

“No, is something wrong?”

“I’m afraid there is,” Jack said, and told her about what had happened last night.

“That sounds very bad,” Mrs. McKinley said, tapping her toes under her desk. “Does her family know?”

“Nothing to say until we find out more from the police. I’m going to call them right now.”

He went into his personal office and after checking the folders Mrs. McKinley had placed on his desk, had her put the call through. He identified himself to the officer who answered and asked if they had come up with anything yet.

“We’re looking into it,” the sergeant said, “but we don’t have much to go on. She could have messed up the apartment herself, or the man you reported seeing there could have done it, but we have no evidence one way or another. She hasn’t been missing for twenty-four hours yet, so we can’t officially declare her a missing person.”

“I would think that an intruder in her apartment would indicate that she hasn’t just walked off,” Jack said, exasperated by the sergeant’s apparent lack of interest.

“Well, sir, we have only your word for that. Nobody saw a man such as you described going up to that floor, and none of the neighbors saw or heard anything suspicious between the time you say Miss Velasquez called and the time the officers arrived on the scene.”

“That doesn’t mean the man wasn’t there.”

“No, sir, but we have no reason yet to believe that the situation is serious. There are a lot more pressing problems to be handled, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“I think,” Jack said, struggling to keep his voice even, “that there’s every reason to assume that the problem is indeed serious.”

“I’m sorry, sir, we’ve got murders, robberies, muggings, dope dealers, black marketeers, God knows what. We’ll get to Miss Velasquez just as soon as we can.”

“All right,” Jack said stiffly. “You have my number, please keep me informed.”

“We’ll do that,” the sergeant said and hung up.

Jack sat staring at his office door for a long moment, bringing his anger under control. It was true that there was more crime in Freeport than the police could handle, but most of the time they didn’t seem any too enthusiastic about handling it. That didn’t help his worries, however.

He had Mrs. McKinley call Emily’s apartment. There was no answer. Then he had her put a call through to Emily’s office. The familiar voice of Joyce Higgins, Emily’s secretary whom Jack had never met, answered.

“Hello, I called last night and left a message on your answering machine.”

“I’m sorry, sir, we got a lot of messages last night. Which one was yours?”

“I was calling from the Escapades, where I was supposed to meet Emily. She—” a tiny crackling sounded on the line. “Sorry,” he went on, “there’s some static. Emily was supposed to—” the crackling came again, only this time he knew what it was, a poorly installed bug.

He felt the hair on his arms rise up as he hung up without further word. He was grateful that he hadn’t identified himself. Emily could have installed a recording tap herself, but after her call and disappearance Jack doubted that that was the case. He didn’t remember hearing any similar bug-static when Emily had called yesterday evening. Somebody else had put that bug there, someone who wanted to know more about Emily’s business than he had any right to know. And that

implied that Emily hadn't just wandered off, but had been abducted.

But if that were the case, there had to be a reason, and whatever that was, the people who had Emily hadn't been able to learn what they wanted from her herself. Had they killed her?

He wished Emily had felt free to tell him more about the conspiracy she had feared. He didn't know what to do next. He thought about calling the police again, but the sergeant's lack of enthusiasm and interest in the case put him off.

Before he could work himself up into a real state, his intercom came on and Mrs. McKinley announced his first client. Ten o'clock already? It was. Jack composed himself and prepared to deal with Mrs. Atchison's drinking problem.

After Mrs. Atchison left, Mrs. McKinley came in, coffee cup in hand, to tell him that both his eleven o'clock and one o'clock appointments had been canceled. "What did the police say about Miss Velasquez?" she finished.

"They're too busy to look into it now," he said bitterly, glancing at the folders on his desk.

"I can't believe that," Mrs. McKinley said.

"Well, that's the gist of what they told me," Jack answered. The two patients who had canceled had both been complaining of Alien Anxiety Syndrome. "What reason did they give for canceling?" he asked, holding up the folders.

"Mr. Brown said he just felt a lot better, and Mr. Clancey said it didn't seem worth the trouble anymore. If I were you, I'd call the police back and demand an explanation."

"If Miss Velasquez doesn't show up by seven thirty tonight, I will. Right now I'm going to her office, to see if anybody there has any answers."

"You could call—"

"Her phone's been bugged." He got up and got ready to leave. "I'll be back at two," he told Mrs. McKinley, and left her standing there with her mouth open.

Emily's offices were decorated with the strong colors, patterned rugs, and

textured fabrics that were the hallmark of the David Hicks school. The secretary, Joyce Higgins, was a startling contrast, a tall young woman who wore bright, clinging dresses and shoulder-length brown hair. Jack introduced himself and Joyce smiled in recognition.

“Emily’s talked a lot about you,” she said, “but I’m afraid she’s not in right now.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Jack said. “Look, I called a little earlier this morning and hung up rather abruptly. I—” “Oh, was that you? I thought it might have been. That static was terrible.”

“It wasn’t static, it was a bug. I—”

“I don’t understand.”

“Somebody has put a tap on your phone line. The best thing to do is to report it to the phone company and have them come out and—”

“That’s terrible, who would want to listen in on our calls?”

“I don’t know, but I suspect it might be whoever is responsible for Emily not meeting me last night.” He went on—with frequent interruptions from Joyce—to explain about Emily’s call, not showing, and the business at the apartment. “I was hoping,” he finished, “that she might have gotten in touch with you here.”

“No, Dr. Page, she hasn’t. This is terrible. Emily didn’t come in yesterday at all, and we were beginning to worry because of this big new contract she was trying to land.” “When was the last time you saw her?”

“Friday afternoon. Shouldn’t we call the police?”

“I have, but I’m not holding my breath. I figure I’d better do a little investigating myself.”

“I think you’d better talk with Marvin,” Joyce said, getting up from behind her desk. She led him through the conference lounge to a small private office at one side.

Marvin Dahlgren, Emily’s partner, was in his late thirties, very blond, with

heavy-lidded eyes in a long face and a slender but muscular build. He wore slacks, a gray blazer, and a dark brown shirt with no tie. When he got up from the drafting table at which he was working, he proved to be a good six feet tall. He did not seem very happy to see Jack.

“This is Dr. Page,” Joyce said by way of introduction. “He thinks something may have happened to Emily.” “Indeed,” Dahlgren said. He did not offer to shake hands. “And how did you come to that conclusion?” Jack explained briefly. Dahlgren listened, strangely suspicious.

“I’m sure,” Dahlgren said when Jack had finished, “that we’re all very concerned about Emily’s whereabouts, but isn’t looking for her yourself a bit beyond your responsibility?”

“Perhaps,” Jack said, “but the police don’t seem eager to take an active interest, and as I am her therapist, I felt I had to do something.”

“A purely professional interest, I’m sure.” Dahlgren turned away, went to his desk, and sat down.

“There was a man in Emily’s apartment last night,” Jack went on. “If it was a friend of hers, then fine, but he denied knowing her, indeed intimated that it wasn’t her apartment at all. Perhaps you might know him.” He described the man as best he could.

“Means nothing to me,” Dahlgren said, not meeting Jack’s eyes. “Are you accustomed to visiting your ‘clients’ in their homes?”

“What’s the matter with you, Dahlgren? I’m Emily’s therapist. She called me for help. When she didn’t show up at the Escapades, I called her apartment, and called here, and then went there to see if she was all right, or leave a message. What would you have me do, just pass off as unworthy of attention, as the police seem to have done?” “I’m sorry Dr. Page, but I don’t know you, and I don’t know that Emily is missing, only that she’s not here nor at her home.”

“Where else might she be, then? I believe she called me from home. Where might she have gone afterwards, given that she was intending to meet me at seven thirty?”

“I really couldn’t say. She was busy all day yesterday with fabric designers.

Maybe she had other appointments to keep.”

“That hardly seems likely. Look, Dahlgren, I’m only trying to help. When did you see her last?”

“Saturday afternoon, here in the office. It’s not unusual for either of us to work on weekends. I had to do some paperwork on the Stafford Hotel account, and Emily was developing some film I think.”

“Did she seem at all upset then? Anxious? Afraid?” “No, she didn’t. She was enthusiastic about the pictures she’d taken Friday evening. I don’t know what they were of.”

“Emily told me something about a big contract she was trying to land,” Jack said, and watched as Dahlgren, who had begun to relax, got stiff again. “Did those pictures have anything to do with that?”

“The pictures, as far as I know, had nothing to do with the contract.”

“Look, there has to be a reason why she didn’t just immediately go to the Escapades. The only thing I can think of is this contract, whatever it is. Could she have gone there for any reason?”

“How should I know? She had an appointment with Vanessa Carpentier Sunday evening, but you say you’ve spoken to her since then.”

“This Carpentier is the one with the decorating job?” “Yes, dammit, what do you think?” Dahlgren got up

from his desk, shoved his hands in his pockets, and paced between his chair and the drafting table. “Look, Page, this is a complete redecoration, a big job, lots of money, and a boost to our reputation. I can’t just go tossing out information that might hurt us.”

“You can’t afford to withhold information that might help us find out what happened to Emily and why. I’d like to talk with this Vanessa Carpentier, how can I get in touch with her?”

“All I know is that her offices are in the Delmark Building.”

“That’s all? You’re Emily’s partner. If this contract is as important as you say, as Emily has led me to believe, surely you have talked with Carpentier yourself.”

“No, I haven’t. First, I’m busy with other work. Second, Emily wanted to handle this herself. I’ll help out if we get the contract, of course, but I really don’t know much about it.”

“All right,” Jack said. He turned to go. “I’ll let you know if I find out anything.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Dahlgren said.

File Four: Tuesday Midday

The Delmark Building was Freeport's newest and finest office building. Owned by WCTY-TV, its rents were the highest in the city, and it was located at the corner of Calvin and Howard, in the heart of Freeport. It was the last major building to be put up before the Visitors came, and only the Wagner Building, two blocks west, was taller.

The underground parking lot was well lit to discourage vagrants and unwanted criminal activity. The elevator led only to the lobby floor, where Jack had to announce himself at a reception desk. One of the three clerks on duty took his name, address, and asked his business before issuing him a numbered stick-on badge. Only then was he allowed to go past to the banks of elevators beyond, flanked by stairs.

Following the reception clerk's instructions, Jack went up to the top floor where he found himself in another large and luxuriously decorated lobby, with the logo of WCTY-TV prominently displayed in metal letters on the wall. There were other people in and passing through the lobby, some of them he recognized from the evening news or other local programs. Off to one side, through a broad series of arches, was a desk behind which sat a secretary. Jack went to her, and asked to speak with Vanessa Carpentier.

"Do you have an appointment?" the pretty young woman asked brightly.

"No, I don't."

"Oh, dear. The president is usually quite busy at this time of day. If you'll give me your name and business, I'll try to arrange an appointment for you, maybe next week."

For a moment, Jack didn't know what to say. No wonder Dahlgren had been so cautious, he thought, if he thought Jack was out to steal a decorating job of this magnitude.

"I don't think I can wait until next week," he said. "I wanted to talk with Ms. Carpentier about Emily Velasquez, who I believe has been discussing a

redecorating job with her. ”

“Oh, of course. Just a moment please.” She touched a button on her intercom. “Someone from Miss Velasquez to see you,” she said to it.

“Send him right in,” a woman’s voice on the other end told her.

“Down the hall to your left,” the secretary, now smiling for real, said to Jack, “and third door on your right.”

“Thank you,” Jack said, and followed her instructions.

Vanessa Carpentier, a tall, slim, vigorous woman in her mid-forties, conveyed a sense of administrative competence while still being feminine. Her blond hair was slightly grayed, and her conservative business suit was relieved by a

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careful and elegant bit of color in the scarf at her neck. She came around the desk to meet him, extending a hand in greeting.

V:

“I’m Vanessa Carpentier,” she said, “and you’re . . . ?”

“Doctor Jack Page, Emily Velasquez’s therapist,” Jack said, shaking her hand, quick to correct the misinterpretation the secretary had conveyed. “I apologize if there has been a misunderstanding. I think Miss Velasquez may be in serious trouble, and I need all the help I can get.” “What kind of trouble?” Carpentier asked, cooling visibly and returning to her desk.

“Emily seems to have disappeared.” Carpentier’s eyebrows shot up, and Jack took the opportunity to sit down in one of the chairs in front of the desk. “I can’t say for sure, but she may have been abducted.”

“Are you a detective, Dr. Page?”

“No, I’m her therapist, as I said. Emily called me yesterday evening with a story

I'm not free to discuss. Since then she has dropped out of sight, and I'm hoping you might be able to give me some clues."

"Dr. Page, what can I possibly tell you?"

"Did Miss Velasquez have a meeting with you Sunday evening?"

"Yes, she did, we talked about redecorating this office and the public offices out front."

"Did she seem at all upset at the time? Was she frightened? Was there anything in her behavior that might make you think she would run off?"

"No, nothing like that at all. She was excited about the job, had some very good ideas. We spent the evening working up an initial plan, and she was to get back in touch

with me about detailed suggestions. When did she disappear?"

"Some time after six yesterday evening. As far as I can tell, you were the last person, other than myself, to have spoken with her, and certainly the last person to have seen her. "

"I wish I could help you, Dr. Page, but I don't think I can. You think she may have been kidnapped?"

"It's a possibility."

"Have you talked to the police?"

Jack sighed. "I have. They don't seem to take it very seriously. That's why I've started looking into it myself." "This is terrible. Emily had such good ideas, too. But I really don't see what I can tell you. You spoke to her long after I did."

"That's true, but I know this job was very important to her, perhaps the only thing that would have sidetracked her from meeting me last night."

"You think she might have come here?"

"Did she?"

“Not to my knowledge. Just a moment.” She swiveled around so she could touch a button on her intercom. “Ron,” she said, “can you come in here a moment, please?”

After a moment a tall man in a uniform-like blazer came in. He was in his forties, with the build of a slim athlete gone soft. He was bald, with a thick mustache, and carried a pistol in a holster under his right arm.

“Dr. Page,” Carpentier said, “this is Ron Torino, my chief of security.” She quickly summarized for Torino what Jack had told her. “Dr. Page,” she concluded, “wants to know if Miss Velasquez came here yesterday evening any time after six P.M.”

“Well, now, I couldn’t say,” Torino answered, paying no attention to Jack at all.

“Did the guard on duty Sunday night notice anything peculiar when they let her out of the building?” Carpentier went on.

“That would have been Brian Sorensen,” Torino said. “He was on duty last night too, but he’s had an accident and is in the hospital.”

“What happened?” Carpentier asked.

“I don’t know for sure. Simmons found him early yesterday evening, lying unconscious in the lobby downstairs. Sorensen had been on duty less than an hour, and had failed to key a security box on his rounds. Simmons tracked him from the last box and found him at the foot of the stairs by the elevators.”

“When was that, exactly?” Jack asked.

Torino gave him a long silent stare, scratching the skin under his left ear, then turned back to Carpentier. “He was found just before seven P.M.,” he said, taking out a notebook. “Six fifty, to be exact. He’d keyed the last box at six forty.” He put the notebook away.

“That’s between the time Ms. Velasquez called me,” Jack said, “and the time she was supposed to meet me.” “And what does that mean?” Torino said, turning to face him.

“I don’t know,” Jack said, “maybe nothing.”

“Well, now, I’ve just gotten word from the hospital that Sorensen will be all right, he’s had a concussion. I was just going to go over there and talk to him about the accident. I’ll ask him about Ms. Velasquez.”

“Could I come with you?” Jack asked. “I’d like to ask him myself, just in case he noticed something Sunday night.”

Torino straightened the skirts of his impeccable blazer and glanced at Carpentier. She nodded permission.

“If you want to,” Torino said.

“I’ll drive,” Jack offered.

File Five: Tuesday Midday

Jack drove a silent Torino east on Howard to the jog at US 18, then out Wall Street, where the porno parlors and adult bookstores advertised openly. Mercy Hospital was just outside the residential high-rise area in a neighborhood otherwise given over to single-family dwellings.

Torino took charge at the registration desk, and soon had them up on the fourth floor nursing station. There they ran into trouble. The head nurse wouldn't let them in to talk with Sorensen.

"Well, now," Torino said, "I just got a call saying that I could."

"I'm sorry," the nurse said, "Mr. Sorensen is not well enough, and besides it's not visiting hours."

Torino scratched the skin under his left ear. "Sorensen was on duty last night when he had his accident, and I have to know whether or not anybody came into the building while he was unconscious."

"If he was unconscious," the nurse said, "then he couldn't tell you."

"Suppose you let me ask him," Torino said, adjusting his blazer.

"If you'll come back at eight o'clock this evening, we'll see if he can have visitors then."

"I am not a visitor," Torino said, his voice rising slightly. "I am chief of security for WCTY-TV and the whole Delmark Building, and Sorensen was injured in the line of duty. I—"

"Mr. Sorensen slipped and fell," the nurse interrupted. "I know that. But I have to find out who else was in the lobby at that time."

"I'm sorry. You cannot go in now."

"Jesus! Then why in the hell did somebody call and tell me that I could?"

“I’m sure I don’t know, and will you please keep your voice down.”

Torino took out his notebook, flipped through the pages, then put it away. “In that case,” he said, “I’d like to speak with Dr. Jobs.”

“Very well,” the nurse said. She turned on the microphone by her desk and spoke into it. “Dr. Jobs, Dr. Jobs, you have a visitor at Station 4B.” Then she sat back and stared at Torino defiantly.

A few moments later a slightly stocky woman in her late forties, wearing a typical white hospital coat over a dark skirt, came to the nurse’s station. Her white on blue name-tag identified her as Dr. Betty Jobs.

“These gentlemen,” the nurse said, “insist on seeing Mr. Sorensen.”

Dr. Jobs looked at Jack and Ron Torino. “I’m sorry,” she said, “Mr. Sorensen is not in a condition to talk with anyone.”

“I’m Ron Torino, and I received a call less than fifteen minutes ago to the effect that he was.”

“Mr. Torino. I appologize. Mr. Sorensen is in fact conscious, but he is very confused. You should not have been told to come here at this time. In fact, it would be best if you could wait until tomorrow.”

“We may not have that much time,” Jack said, stepping forward. “Mr. Sorensen may know something about the disappearance of a patient of mine, and if he does, the sooner we find out about it the better.”

“And you are . . . ?”

“Doctor Jack Page. I’m a clinical psychologist. My patient may have been in the building when Mr. Sorensen had his accident. It is important that we find out.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Page, but you should know that a concussion victim has very poor memory of events immediately prior to the trauma. Even if he saw your patient, I don’t think he could tell you anything.”

“Now look,” Torino said, “we don’t want to put him on the rack, just talk to him for a minute or two. There’s a possible kidnapping involved here, illegal entry,

who knows what, and we need to know whether to call in the police. If we can't talk to Sorensen, we'll have to come back with an officer. "

"Well, Mr. Torino," Dr. Jobs said, folding her arms, "since you put it that way. But. You will keep it brief. Mrs. Charker," she said to the head nurse, "have a nurse take these men to Mr. Sorensen's room, and stay with them until they've finished."

Sorensen, a big and blond man in his late twenties, with a handsome if craggy face, was the only patient in the double room. He looked up as Jack and Torino, with the nurse beside them, came over to his bed.

"How you doing, Brian?" Torino asked.

"Kind of fuzzy," Sorensen said, looking at Jack with vague curiosity.

"How's your head?"

"Doesn't hurt. But I'm still not thinking too clearly." "Dr. Jobs says you're going to be all right. Want to tell me what happened?"

Sorensen shook his head slowly, and gazed off at the blank wall. "I don't really remember," he said. "I had just keyed in at the mezzanine station, and was coming down the stairs by the central elevators. I don't know whether I stepped on something, or missed a step, or what. I remember seeing my right foot way up in the air in front of me, and I knew I was falling, but that's it. Not what happened before, not hitting my head, just that one image. Bizarre."

"There was nobody with you?"

"No, everything was as it should be."

The nurse interrupted at this point. "If that's all you need to know," she said to Torino, "we should go now." "Just a moment," Jack said. "Brian, I'm Jack Page. You know Emily Velasquez, don't you?"

"I know who she is, yes."

"Were you on duty Sunday night when Emily came to talk with Vanessa Carpentier?"

“Not when she came, but I let her out of the building when she was through.”

“That hardly bears on Mr. Sorensen’s accident,” the nurse said. “I really think you should go now.”

“Wait a minute,” Sorensen said. “What’s the deal with Velasquez?”

“She’s turned up missing,” Jack answered. “I spoke with her early yesterday evening, and she failed to show up for an appointment with me for seven thirty that night. She hasn’t been seen since.”

“Well, I saw her yesterday, just before my accident I think.”

“You really must leave now,” the nurse insisted.

“Just a minute,” Torino said. “This is exactly what we came here for. Go on, Brian, what do you remember?” “That’s just the trouble,” Sorensen said as the nurse, angry, strode out of the room. “Everything is all mixed up and fuzzy. I wasn’t paying attention, I was just coming down the stairs, but now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure I saw Velasquez coming in the door at that time. You get a clear view of the door,” he explained to Jack, “all the way from the top of the stairs.”

“This wasn’t Sunday night when you saw her come in?” Jack asked.

“No, she was already there when I came on duty. Last night she seemed to be in a hurry. But that must have been just before I fell, because Simmons says he found me not quite all the way to the bottom of the stairs.”

“You keyed in at the mezzanine station at six forty,” Torino said, “and you were found at six fifty.” He turned to Jack. “Those two stations are only six minutes apart,” he explained.

“Simmons must have been awfully quick,” Jack said, “to have come after such a short delay.”

“A two minute delay is all we need,” Torino said. “All right, Brian, this is what we want, go on.”

“Well, let me think. I was coming down the stairs, I saw

Velasquez coming in the door, and—” He closed his eyes with the effect to remember. “She came in, stopped, froze, as if something had frightened her. She just stopped and the door swung shut behind her.”

“Was there anybody else in the lobby?” Jack asked. “Ye-es, yes there was, I don’t know his name, he was just coming from the elevators, somebody who had worked with Miss Carpentier a while ago, I forget just when, right now.”

“All right, gentlemen,” Dr. Jobs said, coming into the room. “This has gone on long enough. When my nurse asks you to leave, you leave.”

“Well, now,” Torino said, turning to her, “we’re just coming to the good part. Thirty seconds more won’t hurt Sorensen, and it may save somebody else’s life.”

Dr. Jobs glared up at him, her arms folded across her chest. “Just thirty seconds then,” she said.

“Who was the man?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know his name, and I must have slipped right about then, because my memory gets very vague. But wait, it must have been him, whoever it was, that frightened Velasquez, because he was the only other person in the lobby at the time, and she turned and ran back out the door, and the man started to chase after her—I think. Anyway, the next thing I remember was my foot in the air, and the next thing after that was talking to Simmons in the ambulance.”

File Six: Tuesday Afternoon

Jack dropped Torino off in front of the Delmark Building. “Thanks for your help,” he said. “If you can find out who that man was, I’d greatly appreciate it.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Torino told him, “but I can’t promise anything. If he checked in at reception, we’ll have his name, but if he had a pass, it will be harder.” “Miss Carpentier might know who he was.”

“Well, now, Miss Carpentier is rather discreet, you might say. She doesn’t like people nosing into her business, especially if it has anything to do with her technical work. But I’ll do what I can.”

Jack pulled away from the curb, and as it was nearly lunch time, drove through the Wendy’s on the corner of Easter and US 18, diagonally across from the building

where Emily had her offices. Eating hurriedly, he pulled into her parking deck and took the elevator up to her offices.

Both Joyce Higgins and Marvin Dahlgren were there. Jack told them what he had learned from Sorensen, and they both agreed that the police should be told as well.

“I’m sure you’re right,” Jack said, “but I have a funny feeling that they’ll tell me they’re too busy.”

“But if what Sorensen said is true,” Joyce said, “then it’s not just a missing person but a kidnapping.”

“All right,” Jack said and called from the phone on Joyce’s desk. The officer he talked to said that someone would be around shortly to take a more complete statement.

“You know who Carpentier is?” Jack asked Dahlgren as he put down the phone.

“Something to do with WCTY.”

“She’s the president. The job Emily was working on involves not only Carpentier’s personal office, but also the public offices and lobbies.”

“God damn,” Dahlgren said, truly surprised. “I guess Emily was trying to pull off a coup.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and exchanged glances with an equally impressed Joyce. “God damn,” he said again, “how are we going to secure that contract with Emily missing?”

“We probably just won’t get it,” Joyce said, “but what about poor Emily?”

“The police are working on it,” Dahlgren said. He glanced sidelong at Jack. “Dr. Page is working on it. What do you suggest we do?” he asked Joyce.

“I don’t know, Marvin, it just seems wrong somehow to worry about a job when Emily is being held by kidnappers.”

“How do you think she’ll feel if we’ve let this contract slip out of our hands? If I could do something, I would, but

in the meantime, we’ve got to keep Carpentier satisfied until Emily comes back.”

“I think you’re right, Dahlgren,” Jack said. “In times of crisis, it’s best to continue with the rest of your life as normally as possible.”

“You know,” Dahlgren said, turning back to him, “when you first came in here, I really thought you were out to steal our business. We’re not the only decorators in Freeport, and any of the other companies would love a chance at this job. I knew that much, even if Emily didn’t confide the details to me. So what should I do?”

“Whatever you would do if Emily were in the hospital or on vacation.”

“The trouble is, I don’t know what Emily had planned.” “We’ll go through her files,” Joyce said. “But shouldn’t the police have come by now?”

“You’d think so,” Jack said. “I’d better call them again, I’ve got an appointment at two.”

The officer he had spoken to before answered the phone, and when Jack asked

when someone was coming to take his statement, he was transferred to a Lieutenant LeGrange. Patiently, Jack went through the whole story again, and asked what was being done about Emily, and who would take the information he'd gotten from Sorensen.

"I'm sorry about that," LeGrange said, "but we've been having some trouble lately, and there just aren't enough officers to go around. We'll get on it just as soon as we can. "

"I really think this is more than just a missing person, " Jack insisted. "Everything points to a kidnapping."

"You can't be sure of that. You're not a police officer, you don't know how to interpret witnesses. Besides, this Sorensen admits he was not in complete control of his faculties at the time, so we can't take what he says too seriously just yet."

"How about the man in Miss Velasquez's apartment, the fact that it was searched, the phone call to me?"

"Ah, yes. Miss Velasquez is one of your patients, not what you'd call the most stable of people. As for the man, we don't know there was anybody there, or that you didn't call on the wrong apartment by mistake. You see, we really have very little to go on. Why would anybody want to kidnap her?"

"I don't know," Jack said, getting exasperated. "She didn't want to talk to me about it on the phone."

"Well, you can see that there's not much we can do. We are checking into the situation, and we'll try to get in touch with you as soon as we learn anything. I suspect that she's just run off."

"That doesn't make any sense," Jack said.

"It never does, but believe me, it happens all the time. Now if you'll excuse me, I have other business to attend to."

"They really don't sound very helpful, do they?" Joyce said as Jack hung up.

"I'm getting the feeling," Jack said, "that the harder I push, the less likely they are to do anything."

“It sounds,” Dahlgren said, “like they’re dragging their heels deliberately.”

“More likely they’re just lazy,” Jack said. “This town may be corrupt, but I don’t see how that applies to a kidnapping. ”

“You never can tell,” Dahlgren said. “If one of them was involved somehow, they’d protect their own, wouldn’t they?”

“Sure, but we don’t know that. And besides, I don’t believe in conspiracies.”

“But isn’t that what Emily called you about in the first place?” Dahlgren pursued. “And doesn’t all that’s happened since then confirm that there is some kind of a conspiracy going on? Not like a Watergate, of course.” “It does seem that way,” Jack said, “and that’s all the more reason to not jump to that conclusion. If it’s not true, and we assume that it is, we’ll miss the real clues when they come along.”

“I feel so helpless,” Joyce said.

“So do I,” Jack agreed.

File Seven: Tuesday Afternoon

Jack pulled into his parking place in the deck under his building. As he got out he noticed a slender man in a sport jacket standing just a few cars away. The light was not very good here, and the man turned away almost at once, but he was somehow vaguely familiar, and Jack wondered if he was one of the dope dealers he'd passed so often these days. He bent down to lock the door of his car, and when he straightened up the man was walking away.

When he got to his office it was nearly two o'clock. Mrs. McKinley informed him that his client was waiting for him. He listened to Mrs. Finkel distractedly, and as soon as she left, had Mrs. McKinley put a call through to David Mallard, a friend who was the assistant attorney for Freeport.

"David," he said when his call was answered, "this is Jack. Listen, you got a couple minutes?"

"Ah, sure, Jack, what's up?"

"A client of mine disappeared last night," Jack said, and told Mallard what he knew and had learned about Emily's activities, and what he had surmised so far. He concluded by complaining about the police response to his inquiries. "They just don't seem interested, and keep on putting me off with claims of too much to do and too few men to do it with."

"That's all very true, ah, Jack," Mallard said. "And as you say, it has not yet been twenty-four hours since you last spoke with her."

"But dammit David, what about all the rest? The man in her apartment, the fact that it was searched, the man Sorensen saw chasing Emily out of the Delmark Building? That's not just a missing person, that's a kidnapping." "As far as you can tell, yes, but, ah, I see your point. Even if everything you've said is wrong or misinterpreted, the police should be taking it seriously."

"They should. And they aren't. Why not? Is the police force so corrupt that they just don't bother with a kidnapping if there's no profit in it for them?"

“Some, yes, but not all, Jack. Not all. It does seem rather strange, I’ll admit. Ah, who did you talk to?”

“A Lieutenant LeGrange. He didn’t sound busy, he sounded like he was putting me off. Can you look into this for me, just kind of ask around to find out what’s up? I’m really afraid Emily’s life could be in danger.”

“I’ll do what I can, but it may take a while. You understand I’ll, ah, have to be discreet. But I’ll call you back later, whatever.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Jack said, and they hung up.

His three o’clock client was a Mrs. Voile. She had been seeing Jack for almost two years, trying to come to terms with her sometimes disabling Alien Anxiety Syndrome. During the last month or so she had shown a dramatic improvement, and though she was not yet in full control of her fears, her diminished anxiety made Jack think about his own reaction to the Visitors lately. As he wrote up her report, after she’d gone, he realized that even he was a lot less concerned than he had been just recently.

He had no other appointments that afternoon, but several for the early evening—people who just couldn’t take the time off from work. And as his lunch seemed to have disappeared, he decided to go out for a light supper. He told Mrs. McKinley of his plans and went down to the parking deck below the building.

The lights in his part of the deck, never very bright in the first place, were now almost all out. As he approached his car in the rear darkness, a man stepped out of the shadows ahead of him, rather short and slender, in slacks and sport coat—the same man he’d seen before.

Before Jack could react two other men appeared, one on either side. Even in the dimness Jack could see that the one on his left was ugly, wearing a brown suit, while the one on his right, in a dark blue suit, was totally unremarkable. He realized that he was just about to be mugged.

Sportcoat stepped up to him quickly, a bit in advance of the other two. Jack lunged at the man, striking out with his good right hand and feeling the satisfaction of a solid connection high on Sportcoat’s cheekbone. The man staggered back against a car, then slid to the pavement.

This took the other two by surprise, and they lost a second in hesitation. But only a second. Jack turned to his right, then lashed out with his left foot at the ugly man in the brown suit, who was now right behind him. As his foot struck Brownsuit's stomach, Jack pushed off and lashed out with his right hand, catching Bluesuit high on the shoulder.

Sportcoat, on the pavement, groaned and rolled over, trying to get to his feet. With the other two momentarily off balance, Jack stepped over to Sportcoat and kicked him hard in the chest, knocking him back against the side of the car. Bluesuit was coming back quickly, almost leaping at Jack with open arms. Jack stepped into the man's embrace and, almost face to face, struck him hard in the solar plexus. Bluesuit went to his knees.

Pushing him aside, Jack turned back to see Brownsuit, his pink face, like a pig's, contorted in pain, crouching a few feet away. Jack stepped up to him, ready to knock him down, but Brownsuit lurched upright and fled through the parked cars.

Turning back to Bluesuit, whose face he had not seen even close up, Jack saw him also running away in a kind of pathetic hobble, half doubled over. Only Sportcoat was left, lying on the pavement.

Jack went to him, grabbed him by the lapels of his muted plaid jacket and dragged him to his feet. The man's knees buckled, so Jack leaned him against a car. The man tried to protect his face with his hands.

"I wasn't as easy a mark as you thought I'd be, was I?" Jack said, giving the man a shake.

"Leave me alone, Page," the man whined. "You hit me first, we just wanted to talk."

"Sure you did, that's why you came at me from three sides like that." He knocked the man's hands aside with his left arm and grabbed him around the throat with his right hand. "You have the advantage over me," he said, squeezing not too hard. "I don't like people who know my name when I don't know theirs." The man reached up to try to pry Jack's hand loose, but Jack just squeezed harder and with his left hand reached into the man's inner coat pocket. He found the wallet, pulled it out, and while the man choked and struggled ineffectually, flipped the wallet open. A driver's licence was clearly visible in the transparent

window, and even in this dim light, Jack could read the name—Rudy Salanis.

“You want to talk?” Jack said, putting the wallet back. “So talk, Mr. Salanis.” He relaxed his hold on Salanis’s throat a bit.

Salanis tried to lunge away but Jack struck him on the side of the head with his gloved artificial left hand and took a firmer hold with his right.

“Come on,” he said, “what’s this all about?” “Nothing, man,” Salanis choked out, “we’re just looking for some pictures.”

“Sure you are,” Jack said, thinking maybe this was some kind of pornography roust. “What makes you think I have any pictures?”

“If you don’t know,” Salanis rasped, trying again to remove Jack’s hand from his throat, “I sure ain’t gonna tell you.”

Jack had no trouble keeping hold of him with his one good hand, abnormally strengthened in compensation for the loss of his left, but he didn’t want to strangle the man, he wanted him to talk. Very carefully, he kned Salanis in the groin. Salanis gasped, and quickly found new positions for his hands.

“Come on, now,” Jack said. “You can talk. I can keep on dishing this out if you want. What pictures?”

“The pictures Velasquez took the other night,” Salanis cried, still trying to protect himself.

“I think you know more than I do,” Jack said. “What about those pictures?”

“Nothing.”

Jack kned him again; Salanis’s hands were no protection. Salanis gasped, but otherwise was silent. Jack hit him hard with his false hand, the metal of the thumb clanging against the side of Salanis’s skull.

“Leave me alone,” Salanis cried.

“How do you know about pictures?” Jack demanded, his face only inches from Salanis’s. “Where’s Emily?”

“I don’t know.”

“The hell you don’t.” Jack tightened his hold on Salanis’s throat and slammed him back against the car several times. “Come on, where is she?”

“Swear to God,” Salanis choked out, “all I know is that she took some pictures at the Regency Friday night. We just wanted to find out if she’d showed them to you.”

“She was kidnapped before she had the chance,” Jack said, almost shouting in the man’s face. “Now where is she?”

“I don’t know.”

Jack slammed him against the car again, and struck him across the face with the back of his gloved left hand.

“Swear to God!” Salanis cried, “I don’t know where she is!”

“And what’s so important about some pictures of an old theater?”

“I don’t know, swear to God I don’t know.” “Somebody does, though, don’t they?”

“I’m not talking.”

Jack forced himself to step back, still holding Salanis’s throat but keeping him at arm’s length. He believed the man’s ignorance. Salanis was a coward, or he wouldn’t have said as much as he had, but it was clear to Jack that Salanis was more afraid of his boss than of being beaten further. He decided to try another ploy.

“I think we should go talk to the police,” he said.

“Fine,” Salanis whimpered. “Let’s do that. They won’t hold me. I’m the one who’s beaten up, what are you going to charge me with?”

It was a good point. His bluff had been called. He let go of Salanis’s throat and took another step back.

“Why don’t you go and report me to them now,” he said. “Tell them how you and two other guys jumped a one-armed man, and he beat you *single handed*.”

Salanis leaned against the car, gasping, gingerly feeling his bruises, staring at Jack.

“Tell your boss about it, too,” Jack said, shrugging his shoulders to straighten his coat and settle the straps of his prosthesis. Then, feigning a nonchalance he didn’t feel, he turned away and went slowly and deliberately to his car. He checked his watch as he slipped in behind the wheel. The whole affair had taken less than ten minutes.

He looked back at Salanis and saw the man hurrying off. Shaking with reaction, Jack started the car and drove unsteadily up the ramp to the exit. After all, he still needed some supper. It was only when he pulled out into the late afternoon traffic that he realized why the man had seemed familiar. It was Salanis whom he’d seen in Emily’s apartment last night.

It was after five when he got back to his office. Mrs. McKinley had gone home, but had left a pot of coffee for him. He tried to work, but his mind was in a turmoil. Dare he call the police, now, with this new bit of information?

No, he decided, better to call Mallard, who should have had time to get home by now.

“David,” he said when Mallard answered, “this is Jack. I’m sorry to disturb your dinner, but I’ve just learned something.” Quickly he told Mallard about the mugging, and what Salanis had said about Emily and the photos.

“It, ah, all hangs together,” Mallard said when Jack had finished. “Salanis is known to be connected with, ah, the Freeport mob, so whatever those pictures were that Emily took, the mob is interested in them.”

“You think the mob kidnapped Emily?” Jack asked, knowing the answer.

“If Salanis was involved, then, ah, yes, I do.”

“Is the mob putting pressure on the police about this?” “I haven’t been able to find out anything, Jack, but, ah, it’s quite likely. My contacts in the department,

ah, just say they can't talk about it, not even to me. Which makes it even more likely that, ah, the mob's involved somehow. It would take somebody as influential as Vincent Kline to have that kind of influence."

"But it just doesn't make any sense," Jack said. Vincent Kline was known to be the boss of Freeport's criminal organization. "Why would Kline be interested in pictures of an old theater?"

"I really don't know, Jack, and there isn't too much more I can do without, ah, arousing suspicion. We know that several of the ranking officers on the force are in the mob's pocket, and if I push too hard, ah, it could make things worse for Emily."

"Is there nothing you can do?"

"Not until I get some kind of hard evidence, Jack. And that's tricky, because, ah, the people who might provide it are probably in the mob's pay, and I'm not sure I can trust everybody here in my department either. If I move too openly, it wouldn't be hard for somebody to just have me fired, or worse."

"There's got to be somebody in government you can trust. "

"I'm sure there is, but I don't know who. Look, ah, I'm not being chicken, but I've got to be careful. I started work on this some time ago, before the Visitors came, and the situation has gotten worse. The way it is now, if the mob thinks I have something, but if it isn't enough to move on in a really positive way and frighten some of the marginals into cooperating with me, I could be in danger of my life." "Look, David, if I find out the truth about Emily's kidnapping, if I can show a definite link between that and corruption in government and the police, could you do something then?"

"I think I could, Jack. That, ah, won't help Emily much though, will it?"

"No, but Emily is only one symptom of a larger disease, no matter how much I'm personally concerned."

"I agree, Jack. If you get me some hard evidence, if you can prove that somebody on the force, or, ah, somebody in city government is directly involved in Emily's kidnapping, then I think I could bust this town wide open."

“I’ll do what I can.”

“But Jack, be careful. This thing is so insidious, you just don’t know who you can trust. The thing that makes me wonder, ah, is why Emily Velasquez? As far as I know she has never been involved in anything even, ah, remotely connected with the mob or organized crime. So if it can’t be her, then, ah, it must be those photos, whatever they are.” “Hell, David, if they have Emily, they must have the photos, too. The police have had plenty of time to search her apartment, and I suspect they’ve been into her office as well. They bugged her phone, or somebody did. So in that case, why put the lid on the investigation into her disappearance? It makes me sick just to suggest it, but why not just dump her in the bay, and then let the law take it’s course? Why cover up the kidnapping of an interior designer, for God’s sake?”

“I wish I could tell you, Jack. Look, you’re her therapist; is there anything she ever told you that, ah, makes sense in this situation?”

“Nothing, David. But I’ll bet it was those photos she was referring to when she called and asked to talk to me. She gave me nothing solid, but she did say something about a conspiracy. ”

“If there wasn’t one before, ah, then there sure seems to be one now. You say those pictures she took were of a theater?”

“Yes, the Regency, according to Salanis.”

“Means nothing to me. All I know about it is that it’s scheduled to be tom down soon. A damn shame to, ah, destroy a fine old piece of architecture like that. Why was she taking pictures of it, do you know?”

“Emily was working on a book on architecture and design. The Regency seems a logical subject.”

“Makes sense. But who else would be interested in pictures of an old theater, unless, ah, they were working on a similar book themselves? People like that don’t usually have mob contacts.”

“What about Carpentier?” Jack asked. “Sorensen told me that the man Emily was running from was someone who had worked with Carpentier some time before. Can you think of any possible connection there?”

“Not right offhand. Why was Emily at the Delmark Building when she was so anxious to meet you?”

“Apparently she was just about to land a very important contract with WCTY. Could they have any secrets that the mob would want concealed? Does the mob have any connection with WCTY?”

“I don’t think so, lack. TV, radio, and newspapers are pretty clean, all things considered. And so is Carpentier. She was involved with the Visitors up in Northampton about six months ago, and we ran a full check on her then—before, during, and after. She’s clean.”

“Very interesting,” Jack said. “What was she doing for them?”

“Helping to install a TV studio and transmitting station. I have no idea where. But you can bet, with Northampton being completely controlled by the Visitors, we were very careful about the possibility of treason or sabotage. Carpentier came through with flying colors.”

“I don’t know,” Jack said. “I’ve spoken to her, and she didn’t even mention it. There might be something she did or knows about that she wants to keep quiet, just because of those suspicions. And if there were any truth to them, then she would certainly be interested in keeping her role quiet. ” “But what the hell does that have to do with the Regency Theater?”

“I don’t know, you tell me. You’ve investigated Carpentier. What kind of secrets might she have?”

“Getting tired of being a psychologist, Jack? Going into business as a detective now?”

“Hell, David, the police are doing nothing. And I have a very strong interest in Emily Velasquez’s welfare, both professionally and personally. I can’t just sit by while she’s in the mob’s hands.”

“Sorry, Jack, it’s been another one of those long days at the office. Okay. Carpentier. We also checked into her when we approved her license for WCTY. Used to be the FCC did that, but they have no authority this deep in Visitor territory. ” He paused a moment, but Jack could hear him flipping through some papers. “Right,” Mallard went on. “She’s an expert in certain experimental TV

broadcast techniques—this is all gibberish to me, Jack.”

“Okay, what else?”

“Let’s see. The Visitors over in Northampton have been trying to get broadcast licenses of various kinds lately, giving her as a reference. As a matter of fact, about seven, eight months ago Northampton actually applied for a license and permission to build a TV studio here in Freeport, can you imagine that? They wanted to use the Regency Theater. We turned them down, of course.”

“I should hope so.”

“If I were you, Jack, I’d go back and, ah, talk to Carpentier again.”

File Eight: Wednesday Morning

Jack found dealing with his first two clients the next morning anything but easy. He was impatient to hear from the police. There could be no excuses this time, he thought while he should have been listening to his second client. The twenty-four hours were up, and Emily was officially a “missing person.”

After writing up his notes, and with no further clients until one, he at last called and was told simply that the investigation was under way. There was nothing he could do to spur them on so he decided to take Mallard’s advice and talk with Vanessa Carpentier again.

Though he had no appointment, he had no difficulty in getting in to see the president of WCTY-TV.

“Have you heard any word on Emily’s whereabouts?” Carpentier asked by way of greeting.

“Nothing. At least the police now acknowledge that she’s missing for real, and supposedly are doing something about it.”

“I suppose that’s encouraging.”

“Not really. But I’ve been able to learn a few things on my own. For example, I know that Emily had been taking some pictures at the Regency Theater just before her disappearance. Also that the Visitors of Northampton tried to get the theater to use for a broadcast studio here. And you worked with the Visitors about six months ago, in Northampton, helping them set up a studio there. The common connection is the Regency. I’m hoping you might be able to tell me something about it.”

“I know,” she said, growing distant, “that it was built in 1923, that it’s a fine example of the architecture of that period, and that it is going to be torn down soon.”

“But why would Emily’s pictures of the theater cause the mob to kidnap her? Why were the Visitors interested in the Regency?”

“Don’t you think those questions are better left to the police?”

“Perhaps, but they don’t seem inclined to ask them.”

“I really don’t think I can help you,” Carpentier said. “Yes, I did work with Northampton, six months ago, but that was all very carefully investigated and cleared. And at that time, they did mention something about an interest in the Regency, regretting that they had not been granted permission to build there or a license to broadcast.”

“Why in heaven’s name did they want a TV studio in Freeport?”

“Dr. Page, they really didn’t confide in me. All I know is that they said they wanted to ‘serve’ the naturalized Visitors in Freeport. I didn’t believe that for a minute, of course.”

“Of course,” Jack said dryly. “The next question is, how does organized crime fit in?”

“Do you think the mob has something to do with this?” “Three men, at least one of them known to be connected with the underworld, tried to mug me yesterday afternoon. It was from them that I learned about the Regency photos. ” “This is getting scary,” Carpentier said. “Vincent Kline seems to have a finger in every pie. Thank heavens he’s not been able to horn in on WCTY.”

“Or the radio stations,” Jack said. “Or the newspapers. ” “You seem to know a lot.”

“I know practically nothing. And that’s the problem. It was a mobster who tried to attack me today, but the only connection I can see is between the Regency and Northampton’s Visitors. That’s why I’ve come to you, since you’ve dealt with them, and might know something that will help. ” “I don’t think I do.”

“Look, any little thing might be important. Can you tell me something about what you did up in Northampton?” “I’d really rather not. You have to understand, I’m a bit sensitive about having worked with them at all.”

“Yes, but I also know that the investigation of your activities there gave you a clean bill of health—”

“Just who have you been talking to?”

“A friend of mine in city government. But can’t you see? Emily took photos of the Regency, the Visitors were interested in the Regency for a studio, you helped them build a studio in Northampton. It all ties together. I’m not accusing you, I just think you might know something you’re not aware of.”

“I really doubt that. And I don’t see a connection at all. You said it was the mob who kidnapped Emily. That’s the connection I see. As for what I did in Northampton, that’s none of your business.”

“Much of what you did is on public record.”

“I know that, dammit. But I have my reputation to consider. Aside from any personal scandal, there are other reasons for me to be discreet. All I can say is that my job there involved things that are sensitive, both on a racial and a technical level.”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to find out about.” “If it’s in the public record, you’re welcome to the information. Look, I don’t like the Visitors much, but there were some technical subjects that I just can’t talk about, especially with someone whom I don’t really know all that well.”

“All right,” Jack said, “forget that. After all, as I see it, the crucial point is the Regency Theater. Northampton did not get permission to use the Regency. It was photos of the Regency that got Emily into trouble. Can you think of anything about that theater itself that might give me a clue as to who has Emily, or why they took her?”

“It would have made a fine studio,” Carpentier said, somewhat wistfully. “It’s really a shame it’s going to be tom down. No, I can’t—now wait a minute.” She sat back and stared at the ceiling.

“Now I remember,” she said after a long moment. “When Emily came here Sunday night she was supposed to have brought a folio of photos illustrating some of her ideas for the redecoration. But she’d brought the wrong folder by mistake. She just glanced at it, and I didn’t really see what was in it, but I’m sure one of the pictures was of the Regency. She forgot to take them with her when she left. ” “Aha!” Jack said. “Then that’s why she was coming hack here Monday night, after she called me, to get the photos back.”

“She never came here,” Carpentier said, “I was here Monday, and I would have seen her.”

“She never got past the front door,” Jack said. “Didn’t Torino tell you? Sorensen saw her coming in, just before he had his accident. She saw somebody coming from the elevators, turned and ran out. And I’ll bet you that was when she was kidnapped, right outside this building.”

“I can’t believe that. That’s terrible.”

“And the photos are still here. Can you find them for me, please?”

“Certainly.” She spoke into her intercom, and a moment later her secretary brought in a large folder. Carpentier curiously flipped through it. “This is it, all right,” she said, handing it to Jack. “Exteriors, interiors, she must have gone through the whole building.”

Jack glanced at the first few pictures. The photography was amateur but good, concentrating on architectural details.

“They don’t look very special to me,” he said. “I don’t know what I was expecting. I’ll have to look them over in more detail, later.”

“Shouldn’t they be returned to Emily’s office?”

“Of course, Dahlgren may need them. He’s Emily’s partner. Hasn’t he gotten in touch with you?”

“No, I haven’t heard a word. If you’re going by there, why don’t you take the photos back with you. It will be easier than mailing them.”

“I’d be glad to. I want to talk to Dahlgren and Joyce about what I’ve uncovered so far.”

“Do you suppose this Dahlgren can take on the job I talked with Emily about? I hate to sound unfeeling, but the

decorating still has to be done, and if Emily is missing, I’ll have to go elsewhere.”

“Probably the best thing would be for you to get in touch with Dahlgren and talk to him about it.”

“I’ll do that,” Carpentier said.

“Thanks for the pictures,” Jack said, and left.

File Nine: Wednesday Midday

Jack wanted to look at Emily's photos before giving them to Marvin Dahlgren, so he stopped in for some lunch at the Wendy's across from her offices. This time he went inside, took one of the larger tables, and spread the pictures out while he ate.

There were sixty of the eight-by-tens. As he flipped through them he could see nothing that could have any possible interest to anybody except architects or interior designers. Until he got to the last three.

They were part of a sequence of shots, somewhat out of order, of the interior of the auditorium, taken from the stage. The theater, once a Loews which had somehow failed to get on the National Register, was 1920's gloptious, with painted plaster arches, columns, false boxes, statuary, all sort of a Moorish garden setting. Though sadly neglected, the grandeur was still evident. Besides the main floor there was a loge with balcony seats behind and, rather unusual, several private boxes on either side at loge level.

Each of these was set in a molded and painted plaster frame representing some kind of fairy castle window, with spires, false stone work, and other over-done features, also in painted plaster. As far as he could judge, all had been taken with a telephoto and illuminated by a strong strobe-flash.

But it was those three that were important. Because there were people in them.

The first photo was focused on the center box of the three on the left hand side, and the men were in the one furthest from the stage, which was only half within the picture. He couldn't tell how many men there were, but he could see three and part of a fourth. They were not facing the camera, and from what he could tell were totally unaware that their picture was being taken. Jack could not make out any faces.

The second photo, however, was a different story. This time the box was nearly centered, and seven startled faces stared out of the shadows at the camera. Emily must have taken the picture just seconds after the first one.

Jack recognized two of the faces straight off'. One was Rudy Salanis, and the other was his pig-faced companion. Both were closer to the front of the box, and hence better illuminated by the flash, which cast strong shadows elsewhere.

Toward the center, a little further back, and somewhat less clear were three men who were obviously the center of whatever was going on up in that box. Jack knew Vincent Kline's face from innumerable newspaper stories and news broadcasts. In his fifties, he was slender, handsome, and stood with almost a military posture.

The second man was Charles Anthony Oswald. Oswald, in his sixties, heavy-set but still good-looking with a full head of graying black hair, was Freeport's most influential citizen. A banker and financier, he had friends in city government, in business, and in industry as well. What the hell, Jack wondered, were Kline and Oswald doing together, secretly, in the box of an abandoned theater?

Jack thought he should know the third man, but for a moment he couldn't place the face. The two men on the far side of the box were complete strangers to him. Their position and posture indicated that, like Salanis and pig-face, they were subsidiary to the three men in the center.

Jack stared at that third face for a long moment before it suddenly clicked. He was just used to seeing that face above the red uniform of a high Visitor official. It was Dwight, who held an important post over in Northampton, something to do with human-Visitor relations.

If Kline and Oswald's presence together there was disturbing, Dwight's was even more so. He was wearing a three-piece pin-stripe suit instead of his usual uniform. He had no business being in Freeport in the first place. Those few Visitors who were allowed to come across the bay had to remain in uniform so that they could be easily identified. A Visitor in human clothing, unless he or she was a registered Natural, was automatically assumed to be a spy. In fact, in Freeport, human clothing was de facto proof of illegal entry, the sentence for which was death.

The third photo, centering on the loge entrance just beyond the boxes, again showed only part of the box in which the men had been meeting. In that photo, all those who were included in the shot had their backs turned, and appeared to be hurrying away. Again, the picture had to have been taken just seconds after

the previous shot.

Their hurried departure spoke more loudly than words the fact that they had no business being there, that they had felt themselves to have been found out. There was no legitimate reason for Oswald, Kline, and Dwight to have met in such a place.

Of course the mob wanted these photos. It linked them all too clearly with big business and government through their association with Oswald who, as far as Jack knew, had so far been above reproach. And for the same reason, Oswald would want the photos suppressed, to protect his as yet unsullied reputation.

As for Dwight, that one picture proved his illegal presence in Freeport. Even if he'd gotten permission to enter the city, the civilian clothes he wore would convict him of espionage, if they could ever bring him back to Freeport for trial, an impossibility since Northampton would not cooperate. Perhaps more important, from Dwight's point of view, was the evidence that he had been there at all. His own superiors might not be happy to learn about that.

And if Dwight had business with Kline, then the Visitors could be involved in other criminal activities in Freeport, the most obvious being the extensive black market which worked both ways. Dwight with Oswald hinted at a deeper government corruption than even the most cynical Free-portian had guessed.

How Emily had managed to escape capture at the time of this meeting Jack could not guess. It could have been just luck on their part that they had been able to get their hands on her Monday night.

Because of Salanis, Jack was sure that it was the mob who had Emily. He lost all interest in finishing his lunch as he speculated about what the mob might have done to her, might still be doing to her. They'd want to know who she'd shown the pictures to, whether there were other copies, and what else she might know or have guessed about the significance of that secret meeting. After all, in the right hands, these photos could cause the arrest of both Kline and Oswald, perhaps even put them behind bars. As for Dwight, if he ever came back to Freeport, he would be arrested and executed almost immediately.

Now Jack understood Emily's incoherent phone call. She had been so afraid that she was imagining things, and even more afraid that she wasn't. He almost wished that she had in fact been suffering from delusion. After all, that could be

helped. But if the mob had killed Emily, there was no consolation in knowing that she was mentally sound. And killing her was the most likely possibility—unless they thought she had come to take the pictures of them deliberately, and were torturing her to find out how she had known about the meeting.

He had eaten Only half his hamburger, but it felt like something gone rotten in his stomach. If Oswald had been there of his own accord, and not somehow a victim of Kline's, then it would have been easy for him to exert pressure on the police, to keep the investigation into Emily's disappearance at low key if not to quash it altogether.

But then, Kline had that kind of influence too, less direct perhaps but just as sure. And since it had been known mobsters who had tried to get to Jack, that convinced him that Kline was in fact the instigator.

But that was jumping to conclusions. Oswald could be a victim, or a partner, Jack had no way of knowing. As for Dwight, how could he tell? He, too, might somehow be under the control of the mob, who found smuggling black market merchandise into Northampton a highly profitable business. His presence in civilian clothes could have been because of Kline's insistence.

Jack had no business making assumptions. Whatever the truth behind the meeting Emily had inadvertently discovered, it was her welfare that Jack was most concerned about. Jack had no friends who might be able to hint at the degree of the mob's involvement in Emily's kidnapping. Mallard knew most of Freeport's politicians, councilmen, and other influential citizens, and could possibly learn something of how Oswald might be involved.

The only thing that was clear was that Jack had to find out more. He could not take these photos to the police. The only person he could trust was David Mallard, and even he might not be of much help. Mallard was in a vulnerable position, surrounded by people in the mob's pay, or corrupt on their own stick.

But Dwight's presence at the theater hinted at a Visitor involvement, and Jack did know some Visitors—Lewis in particular. Though Lewis, like all other Naturals, was no longer active in the fifth column, he might know others who could give Jack some information.

With that thought, Jack decided not to go to Emily's office right now after all, but to go see Lewis instead. He left his unfinished lunch, went back to his car,

and drove up US 18, which became Calvin at this point, to Laurel Avenue in the industrial part of town next to the bay.

He drove east out Laurel to Howe, and turned left to the building where Lewis worked as the chief custodian. It was a tall, old building, right on Bay Shore with only the bay on the other side of the potholed street. Further east was a beach, once popular but now seldom visited.

The building occupied half of the block on which it stood. Once important, it had long since slid downhill. The ground floor was given over to shops and stores of various kinds, many of which were now out of business, their windows covered with sheets of plywood. The upper floors still held offices, low-rent places where marginal businesses could operate, while other parts had been converted to storage, or were left empty. Maintenance here would be minimal, but still, somebody had to do it. Jack couldn't help but think that it would make more sense to tear down this old firetrap on the edge of the city, than the once magnificent Regency Theater.

He easily found a parking place near the main entrance of the building. In the lobby he had to fend off a man wearing dirty but once expensive clothes who wanted to sell him a television set, "real cheap." Once past this obstacle he found his way down to the basement. The place, though crumbling, was clean, a tribute to Lewis's sincerity in his work. Jack couldn't help but feel sorry for him, an intelligent man, being reduced to this.

After wandering around in the corridors for a while, Jack at last found the custodial offices. Two men were sitting among the mops, buckets, and drums of sweeping compound, drinking coffee.

"Is Lewis in the building today?" Jack asked without introducing himself.

"He's up on the third floor," the older of the two men, gray and unshaven, told him. "Some of that old two-strand wiring has gone out."

"How can I find him?"

"Take the back stairs," the younger man said, a duli-looking type in his early twenties, gesturing with his hand that Jack should turn right when he left them. "First door on your left."

Jack thanked them, and following the directions found Lewis in a dingy office, just putting his tools away. He'd had to rip out part of the wall to get to the wiring. "Hey, Jack," Lewis said, "what are you doing here?" "I need some help, Lewis. Do you know anything about Visitors from Northampton coming illegally into Freeport?" "Ah, Jack, that's really not the kind of thing Fd like to talk about, even if I did know anything."

"I know, I'm not asking for any names, I just want to know if it happens."

"Well, sure, I guess, sometimes. Naturals here still have friends and relatives outside the city, you know, and don't dare go up to Northampton to see them. Sometimes these people might come here, just for a visit."

"Do they actually take that kind of a chance? Rather than get a pass?"

"Passes aren't easy to come by, and then you're under observation the whole time. If a guy in Northampton's got a girlfriend down here, it kind of cramps their style—he's not supposed to take his uniform off."

"Fd think it would be easier to sneak the other way." "Sometimes, but Northampton's a lot tighter than Freeport. Down here, you can pass for a Natural."

"I guess there must be some illegal human traffic, too." "Sure there is, but there the situation is reversed. Northampton lets people from Freeport in, if they've got legitimate business, but if you want to spend more than a couple hours, or go there at night, you have to sneak. Why do you want to know?"

"I have reason to believe," Jack said, "that a Visitor, whose name Fd rather not mention at the moment, was here in Freeport illegally a short while ago, and that he might have had something to do with Emily's not showing up the other night. She was kidnapped," he said, and told Lewis about it briefly. "On the other hand," Jack finished, "he might be innocent. I was just wondering if maybe you'd heard something about that from your friends."

"No," Lewis said, more uncomfortable with the conversation than ever, "nothing at all, but then, why should anybody tell me anything?"

"No special reason. But sometimes people say things when they're among their own kind that they wouldn't say otherwise, just gossip perhaps, or rumors. I

suspect that it's Freeport's mob that is really responsible, but if there is a connection with Visitors from Northampton, it might help me get a line on what has happened to Emily, and where she might be now. Will you keep your eyes open?"

"You're not talking about casual friends and family come visiting," Lewis said.

"No, I'm not. Whatever this is, it's criminal—kidnapping and God knows what else. But maybe somebody will say something that you might otherwise pay no attention to. Just pay attention, will you? And let me know?"

"Look, Jack, I can't make you any promises. I don't hang out with activists. Nobody comes to visit me, and I sure as hell never go to Northampton."

"Just listen, Lewis, that's all I'm asking. You were a fifth columnist, you know how to listen, to learn more than the people around you want you to, and you know how to conceal your true interest."

"Jack, I was in the fifth column more by association than by choice. I just found myself doing things one day, and it

terrified me. As soon as I discovered I could escape to Freeport, I did it. I'd rather not get involved again." "Just listen, Lewis. Don't do anything, just listen. I can't pass up any options. I know the mob has some kind of a connection with Northampton, or at least with some relatively prominent Visitors there."

"Can't you tell the police? They'd help"

"They would not. They have not. I've got to do this alone, Lewis. Will you help? In just this little way?" "All right, Jack. I don't like it, it makes me nervous. But if I hear anything, from anybody, I'll let you know."

File Ten: Wednesday Afternoon

Jack got back to his office in time to handle his one o'clock appointment, and then had Mrs. McKinley call David Mallard for him.

"I can't tell you anything, Jack," was the first thing Mallard said. "In fact, I can't even talk about that business."

"Is somebody putting pressure on you?" Jack asked. "You might say that, in a way."

"Anybody there with you?"

"Not exactly, but I'm sure you understand." "Whatever you say will get back to the wrong people," Jack suggested.

"More than likely," Mallard admitted.

"Okay, we won't talk about Emily. But there's something else you might be able to help me with. You know a lot about Vincent Kline, don't you?"

"It's my business to know about him."

"And Charles Anthony Oswald?"

"Sure, what's the connection?"

"I'm hoping you can tell me that."

Mallard was silent for a moment. "I don't know what you're implying," he said at last. "As far as I know, there's nothing going on between them at all."

"What about this indictment Kline's under, any possibility of a connection there?"

"I can't see how. It's a joke, Jack. The D.A. is charging him with conspiracy to defraud, can you believe it? They can't get him on drugs, they can't touch him with black marketeering, and though everybody knows he's involved in

prostitution and numbers, we've never been able to make anything stick. As it is, they're pinning their hopes on this business with the Karol Construction Company. Hell, he might even be guilty, but with the transportation situation as it is between us and the human-controlled cities up north, who can say? He's going to get out of it, Jack."

"And Oswald has nothing to do with that business at all?"

"Absolutely nothing. Why do you ask?"

"I got hold of some photos that Emily took a while back—"

"I can't talk about that."

"You don't have" to, just listen to me for a minute. It's what's in the photos that's important," he went on, and told Mallard about them. "W'noever's responsible," Jack concluded, "it's obvious that that picture is why Emily was kidnapped. But it's the connection between Kline, Oswald, and Dwight that I'm curious about now. You can surmise what that might mean better than I can."

"It sounds real dirty," Mallard said, "but are you sure it's Oswald? As I said, he's one of the few people with, ah, no known or suspected connections with the mob. Maybe it was somebody else."

"It was Oswald, David. Now he might have been forced, but just because he was clean in the past is no guarantee Kline hasn't finally found some way to corrupt him, or blackmail him now."

"That's true, Jack, and I can certainly see why Kline would like to, ah, put Oswald in his pocket. With Oswald and his lawyers and connections on his side, Kline could walk out of that indictment without a fight. But Oswald's tough, and I don't think Kline can do it."

"If you say so, but even if Kline forced Oswald into that meeting, the fact that they met at all could make the indictment stick. Attempted blackmail, conspiracy, whatever. And with Dwight also present, even if he was in the city legally, the way he's dressed it's an automatic conviction for espionage, and Kline's liable to be charged with the same thing. Oswald might be able to get out of it, but Kline wouldn't stand a chance."

“It sounds like a good enough reason for the mob to have, ah . . .”

“To have kidnapped Emily. I agree, I’m convinced Kline or some of his people have her, if she’s still alive.”

“I think you’re right,” Mallard said cautiously, “but really, Jack, I just can’t talk about that, not here, not now, maybe not ever.”

“Okay, I think I understand your position. I’d rather not involve you until I can get you some hard evidence that you can work with, something that could put you in control of the situation—”

“Yes, Jack, if you could do that, I’m not completely helpless. But it would have to be good, damning on first sight, something that I could make public right away, and get them on my side so that if anybody tried to do anything to me, it would only get them in deeper trouble. If you get me something like that, I’ll do whatever I can, but until then, I’ve just got to stay out of it.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Jack said. “My problem is I don’t have a lot of connections. Maybe you could give me some names. You’re really my only chance here. I’m convinced the police have been reached and told to keep their hands off Emily’s case.”

“Ah, yes, I think you could say that. It would be best not to involve them at all, if possible.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. All right, what about Rudy Salanis, can you tell me anything about him?”

“He’s got a long criminal record. He doesn’t work alone, and we don’t know who all his connections are, but if Kline is involved, it’s probably safe to say that Salanis is one of his men. You might try to look up a guy named Marty Patrushka. He’s a known some-time associate of Kline’s. I don’t know how you’re going to get in touch with him, though.”

“What about that guy with a face like a pig?”

“That’s Ryan Hadly. He’s a real bad type, an enforcer, breaks people’s arms if they don’t come across with the protection money and like that.”

“Where does he hang out, do you know?”

“I’m sorry, Jack, I don’t. The police would, of course, but I couldn’t ask them, at least not right out.”

“Keep yourself covered, David, but see what you can find out, will you? Anything will be of help.”

“It will be tricky, Jack, but I’ll see what I can do.” “Thanks, David, I appreciate it.”

Jack put down the phone, far from satisfied. Mallard’s confirmation of police negligence only told him that, whatever it was that Emily had stumbled into, it was not trivial.

“Dr. Page,” Mrs. McKinley said from the doorway, startling Jack out of his thoughts, “Mrs. Davidovich has been waiting for you.”

“Good gravy, I’m sorry. Send her right in.”

After Mrs. Davidovich, there was Mr. Beliasco at three. Then Jack got a call from Lewis,

“Hello, Jack,” he said. His voice sounded worried. “I thought about what you told me, and I decided to ask around a bit, just talked to a few of my friends, you know. ” “What did you come up with?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry, Jack, nobody knows anything about Northampton, about Emily, about illegal entry other than to see family or friends. Some Naturals I know have kind of a grapevine, they hear things from Northampton, know what’s going on here. They couldn’t help me either. Maybe they didn’t trust me.”

“You didn’t get yourself into trouble, did you?”

“I don’t think so, I hope not.”

“All right, I appreciate the effort.”

“I wish I had something to tell you.”

“Even negative reports can be informative. Was there any hint of a connection between Dwight and Charles Anthony Oswald?”

“Dwight, up in Northampton? No, nothing, those names never came up.”

“How about Kline, any casual reference that might have linked him with Dwight?”

“No, I don’t think so . . . no, Jack, nothing at all, why do you ask?”

“I know for a fact that Oswald, Kline, and Dwight were all together, with some other men, here in Freeport. Dwight was in civilian clothes.”

“I don’t like that, Jack. That’s frightening. But you should have told me about that, I could have asked better questions.”

“I don’t want you getting in trouble.”

“I don’t want it either, but you’re talking about something important here. Let me do a little more checking, and I’ll call you back later, okay?”

“Don’t take any chances, Lewis.”

“I won’t, you can believe me.”

Jack had no sooner hung up than the phone rang again. Jack picked it up. “Page here,” he said.

“My name is Annette,” the unmistakably alien voice said. “I have to talk with you, as soon as possible.” “What do you want to speak with me about?” Jack asked. None of his clients were Naturals.

“Not on the phone, Dr. Page. Can we meet somewhere? It’s very important, a janitorial job.”

“Do you have the right number?” Jack asked, and then realized she was referring to Lewis. “Just a moment,” he said. He put her on hold and rang Mrs. McKinley. “What do I have scheduled for this afternoon?” he asked her. “Nothing for the rest of the day, Dr. Page.” “Thanks.” He switched back to Annette. “I’m free,” he said, “where should we meet?”

“You name a place.”

“How 'bout the Black Jack Tavern, on Kesell just off Easter?”

“That will be fine, I'll see you there in a minute.”

She hung up, and Jack sat for a moment, staring at the phone. Was it a trap? Had Lewis given the show away?

Whoever Annette was. Jack had to take the chance. He took Emily's photos out of the desk. Annette might be able to identify some of the other men in the critical picture. And then he thought the better of it, locked them all away in a bottom drawer, and went out to tell Mrs. McKinley that he was going out for the rest of the day.

File Eleven: Wednesday Afternoon

The Black Jack was an old tavern, rather dark, with a long bar across the front and booths at the back. The clientele was mixed, business types with a sprinkling of blue-collar workers, and younger people who hadn't yet formed their careers along with older people looking toward retirement—such as it could be with half the world dominated by Visitors.

Jack went to the bar and ordered a beer. While the bartender opened the cooler, Jack couldn't help but notice another man behind the bar, by the cash register. He was wearing a suit, and talking with a customer who seemed a bit too congenial. The man behind the bar opened the cash register and started counting out money. The “customer” smiled, scooped it up, and walked out. Just a protection payoff.

Jack took his bottle and glass and went around the end of the bar. It was still early, so there were few customers back here, most of them sitting alone. He saw a booth that was empty and started toward it when a feminine Visitor voice quietly spoke his name. He stopped and turned to look at her. She was a young black woman in her early twenties, slightly plump but very pretty.

“Are you Annette?” he asked.

“I am. Won't you join me, Dr. Page?”

He slid into the seat across from her. “Why all this secrecy and urgency?” he asked as he poured his beer.

“There's more going on in Freeport than you might think,” she said. “I'm a Natural, but I'm still active in the fifth column, and we know there's some kind of trouble in the works. The few of us in Freeport function as kind of a message center. But there are other people, both human and Visitor, who would like to shut us down.”

“I guess I'd be naive to think that the people in Northampton don't have an interest in us down here.” “Northampton particularly, but the entire Occupation bureaucracy to a lesser degree as well. Though Diana and the other mothership commanders haven't paid too much attention to Freeport yet, the very fact that

this city is human controlled is a continuing source of irritation. We want to attract as little attention to ourselves as possible.”

“They wouldn’t dare try to move on us,” Jack said. “The Northern States would retaliate immediately.”

“I know, Doctor, but that’s no reason to become complacent. And I’m afraid that’s what you have become. You’re not being discreet enough in your investigation.” “And what do you know about my investigation?” Jack asked, taking a long pull at his beer and refilling the glass from the half-empty bottle.

“Not that much yet, but if you keep on talking to Lewis, we’ll learn a lot more. He’s been asking people about illegal entrants, about someone named Emily. He’s mentioned your name more than once.”

“That doesn’t sound like Lewis,” Jack said. “When I talked with him, he seemed very reluctant to get involved at all.”

“That’s as may be. He’s trying to be discreet, but he doesn’t know how. He was only passively a member of the fifth column, and never got the in-the-field experience the rest of us did, those of us who are still alive. As good a friend as he might be to you, you never should have confided in him in the first place.”

“Did he talk to you?”

“He did. His heart’s in the right place, but he just doesn’t know what he’s doing. And he still has friends and connections in Northampton. What if he takes it into his head to go up there and start asking around? I don’t know what you’re looking for, but if it involves Visitors, and word gets to the wrong people, you’re going to be in more trouble than you bargained for, even down here.”

“I already am, I think,” Jack said. “But it’s from the mob, not Northampton. I went to Lewis because I need all the help I can get.”

“Look, your average person might just pass Lewis off as being nosey, but anybody who’s had any experience with the resistance will be suspicious. I really don’t think you should trust Lewis with your confidence.”

“I’ve known Lewis for two years now, Annette. He’s never given me any cause to doubt or suspect him.” “Of course not. I’ve known him far longer than you

have, and I dare say quite a bit better. He's a nice guy, I like

him a lot, but he's not safe. Sure, he's sympathetic to Earth's cause, and he's been branded as a traitor, but he was convicted by association. I don't think he would deliberately give anything away, but he might let something slip, in all innocence, that you would rather he didn't. And even if he doesn't get you in trouble, he could hurt himself, especially when he goes back to visit friends in Northampton." "Does he go back often?"

"Even once could be too much. Down here, a Natural can pretty much do and talk as she wants. Up there, we Visitors are still very much an occupying force. One wrong word, and he could be arrested—and executed."

"I guess I was too worried about my own concerns to fully realize the jeopardy I was putting him in. But how can he dare to go to Northampton at all?"

"Secretly, of course, just as some Visitors come here secretly to visit family or friends. In a way it's easier for him, he just puts on his uniform and unless somebody actually checks his credentials, they assume he's a part of the system. Those who come down here give themselves away any time they open their mouths. Keep him out of this, Dr. Page. For your sake, and for his."

"I see your point. I hope I haven't already done him harm."

"I don't think you have. But he was the wrong person to go to in the first place. If you want information, you need to talk to someone who might have that information, or access to it—like me."

"I'd appreciate it, Annette, but look, I don't know you, why should you want to help me?"

"Because I am active in the fifth column. If your problem concerns Visitor actions that might jeopardize our activities, the Naturals, or the continued well-being of all Visitors on Earth, I want to know about it."

Jack finished his beer and sat looking speculatively at Annette for a long moment. She could be leading him on, he thought, a counter-resistance activist, fully naturalized but in full sympathy with the Occupation. But she already knew enough about him to know that he was the only person working on Emily's case. There was nothing he could tell her about anti-Visitor activities. If she just

wanted to shut him up, she could have done so easily long before now.

“All right, Annette, I guess I’ll have to trust you—a little. Can you tell me anything about a possible connection between Vincent Kline, Charles Anthony Oswald, and Dwight?”

“Boy, you ask good ones. I know who Kline and Oswald are, but I’ve never heard anything about their being involved with each other. As for Dwight, I know that about six months ago, Dwight hired someone from Freeport to help him install a small TV station up in Northampton somewhere, but how that ties in with Oswald and Kline I can’t say.”

“Vanessa Carpentier,” Jack said, “president of WCTY.” “Yes. He went right to the top. The Office of Human-Visitor relations had been trying to get permission to build a studio in Freeport, God knows why, and as second in charge of that office, he was probably involved with that, too.” “I heard about that,” Jack said. “I can’t figure out why they thought we would give them permission. Further north, maybe, where the balance of power is more equal, but not down here.”

“We can’t figure that out either. Northampton is one of the most strongly held cities in this part of the country, Freeport completely human controlled, but you don’t see a lot of fighting or sabotage, although there is some spying going on. It seems like the two cities are holding each other at arm’s length.

“But it’s not true. Under the surface, there’s a lot of tension, partly because we do have a lot of us Naturals here. That causes considerable hard feeling on the part of us Visitors, on both sides of the bay. And then, the humans of Northampton have Freeport as a constant reminder of the freedoms they’ve lost. It’s surprising there haven’t been more rebellions up there.”

“And Naturals down here,” Jack said, “are far less than second class citizens. You must sometimes regret the freedom and power that you’ve had to give up.”

“In order to keep living, but yes, we could have been part of the ruling class if we had not sympathized with humans. Things seem to be getting better for us down here. I haven’t been called a lizard in weeks. But it’s a bad situation all around, and it could explode at any minute. What we’re afraid of is that this thing that you’re investigating could spark the fuse. If Dwight is involved in any subversive activity, then there could be real trouble, for all of us.” “I can see that now. If we find out anything solid, I know some people who could put that

knowledge to good use, maybe clean things up enough so there won't be an 'explosion.' But that's really just a part of the background. What I'm really concerned about is Emily Velasquez." "Just who is Emily Velasquez?"

"She's a client of mine," Jack said, and told her about the phone call, the man in the empty apartment, the attempted mugging, the photos—and his own personal interest.

Annette was sympathetic. "It sounds bad," she said. "I agree with Emily, there's some kind of conspiracy going on. And whatever it is, there's a lot more to worry about than just Emily's safety. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes. For one thing, I'm pretty sure the mob has got a real hold on city government, and I suspect the police are actively cooperating with the mob."

"There's more to it than that. I'm a resident of Freeport, but I'm also active in the fifth column in Northampton, and in contact with the resistance there as well. We've been hearing some unsettling rumors lately. They imply some kind of anti-human plot, some kind of move against Freeport. It seems to me that this business with Emily could be a part of that plot, and it is this that we want to find out more about. What you told me just now, especially about Dwight, makes me more interested than ever. Whatever is going on, we want to stop it. We—and other fifth columnists all across the country—want to bring peace between our two peoples. We're unwelcome guests, I know, but as far as I'm concerned, there's far more to be gained, for both sides, by cooperation, than by either of us just killing off the other."

"Admirable sentiments, I'm sure. But my primary concern is still Emily's welfare. If I can get certain people enough information so that they can clean up Freeport, or even ease tensions between Freeport and Northampton, that's fine. But first I want to find Emily, if she's still alive." "But don't you see? You're not going to be able to do that unless you become more involved in the larger picture. Her kidnapping was not just an isolated event. Those photos prove that Emily stumbled onto something big. And that something, I'm sure, is this anti-human, anti-Freeport conspiracy. That's why she's been kidnapped, not just to protect Kline, or Oswald."

"That may be true," Jack said, "but I know that Kline is behind the people who kidnapped Emily. It's the mob that I want to find out more about. I can't see how

or why they would be involved in this conspiracy of yours.”

“That’s got me curious too,” Annette admitted. “The occupation administration in Northampton generally avoids collusion with any human organization, legal or illegal. They just don’t trust humans. Too many sympathizers have changed their minds at the last minute, or otherwise proved untrustworthy. And if there were collusion, one would think it would be with Freeport’s government, not with so unreliable an organization as the mob. But if there is a connection, however obscure or tenuous, then it’s very likely that Northampton, not the mob, has Emily right now.”

“I don’t see why.”

“If the mob just wanted Emily dead, all right. But if they kidnapped her, it’s because they think she knows something, and they want to find out what. Criminals are crude, but our interrogation technology is highly effective. More than that, after they’ve wrung Emily of all she knows, they can put her back in Freeport, a converttee, instead of just sinking her in the bay.”

“Oh my God,” Jack said. “Here I was worried about what the mob might be doing to Emily’s body, I never even thought about what the Visitors might be doing to her mind.”

“It can be just as unpleasant as any physical torture, if that’s what the interrogator wants.”

“Damn. What made me think I could possibly be of any help?” He stared at his black-gloved left hand, clenching and unclenching the mechanical thumb. “All right, I’m not going to give up now. Let’s assume that Northampton does in fact have Emily. What will they do to her?”

“Well, interrogate her, of course. We have all kinds of techniques depending on the situation, the urgency, and the personality of the person.”

“They’re going to have a real trick this time, though,” Jack said. “Emily is schizophrenic, she has difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality. She could tell them what she truly believes to be the truth, though it’s all a figment of her imagination. And under stress, that distinction between reality and fantasy becomes more blurred. Whatever she tells them, it’s bound to contain a lot of delusion.”

“That’s as may be,” Annette said, “but if she can’t tell reality and fantasy apart, then they won’t be able to either.” “Unless she tells two contradictory versions of the same story, which she’s almost certain to do. And they won’t be able to tell which is the truth, and which she made up.” “That might actually work in our favor. If they realize they can’t trust anything she tells them, they might give up on her, and more important not act on anything they learn. But then, when they’re through with her, they’ll probably send her to an internment camp somewhere. And then, my friend, she’ll be out of your reach forever. I’m sorry.” “People have been broken out of prison camps before.” “I know, by highly motivated groups of people led by experienced rebels. Not by just one man. Now look, you’ve got a choice. Right now, if you just give up, you’ll probably be left alone, they don’t know enough about you to pursue you further. But if you’re serious about trying to do something for Emily, and if you’re willing to help me and my people look into this conspiracy, then we’ll help you in return.”

“I’m willing,” Jack said. “When do we start?”

“Not right now. I know who you are, but we’re going to have to investigate you further. The resistance movement is going to have to be sure that you can be trusted.”

“Do whatever you have to do. But what do I do next?” “Nothing, right now. But meet me again tonight, nine o’clock, at forty seven North Pine. That’s an apartment building. I’ll introduce you to people there.” And then with a quick, grim smile, she slid out of the booth and left.

File Twelve: Wednesday Evening

The apartment building was toward the west end of the industrial section of town, on the corner of Pine and Vann, a very short block from the bay. Mostly blue-collar workers lived here with their families. It was not a prepossessing place, with a potholed parking lot beside it. Annette was not in the rather seedy lobby.

He went to the mailboxes to try to find her name. As he was scanning the rows of dented metal doors, a short young woman with short dark hair came up to him, dressed a bit too fashionably in lime green slacks and blouse. She didn't look like a prostitute, but Jack couldn't be sure.

"Are you Dr. Page?" she asked.

"I am."

"I'm Sally Greenstreet. Annette couldn't make it and sent me to get you. Shall we go?"

"Aren't we meeting here?"

"This is just a drop, in case you were followed. Do you have a car?"

"Outside."

As they went to his car she apologized for the runaround. "We have to be very careful," she explained. "The man you're going to meet tonight is the leader of Freeport's resistance group."

"I understand," Jack said.

Sally directed him to drive west on Vann until it joined with Bay Shore. A half a block later, at the edge of town, they turned left onto Sanders, a lower middle class neighborhood with prominently displayed neighborhood crime-watch signs. They turned into a driveway after only half a block, number 150, beside a small, ranch-style house, perfectly typical of the neighborhood. There was another car parked ahead of them. There were lights in the front windows of the

house.

Sally let him in the front door. It was just a regular family home, as far as Jack could tell. He had been expecting it to look like some kind of rebel stronghold. From the tiny foyer they went into the living room, where a short, chunky, middle-aged man with dark Latinate features was standing, waiting for them.

“Dr. Page,” Sally said, “this is Douglas Abbot, our leader.”

“Good to meet you, Jack,” Abbot said, coming forward to shake his hand. “I’m sorry to hear about your friend’s trouble. I’m hoping we can work together.”

“I am too,” Jack said, wondering how such a bland looking man could possibly be effective in the resistance movement. “Will Annette be here?” he asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Abbot said. “But she told me all about her conversation with you this afternoon, and we’ve checked you out as thoroughly as we could on such short notice. We’re ready to work with you if you still want to work with us.”

“I am more than just ready,” Jack said. “What do we do first?”

“Have a drink. ” He went over to an Oriental cabinet that served as a bar. “Single malt scotch, I believe,” he said over his shoulder as he took out bottles and glasses. “Will Glenlivet do?”

“That will be fine.”

“Annette told me that you had some photos.” “They’re in my office, locked in my desk.” He accepted the scotch on the rocks and took a sip. “But I can tell you exactly what’s in them,” he went on, and proceeded to do so.

“The implications are fascinating,” Abbot said when Jack finished. “We’ve been talking about them ever since Annette reported in. It’s fairly obvious to us that there is a lot more to the story than meets the eye. Kline bribing Oswald, Oswald bribing Kline, either or both bribing Dwight, Dwight blackmailing them, who knows. If any two of them had met in secret like that, I wouldn’t think more about it. But all three together makes it far more complicated. What were they really there for? And can that meeting have had anything to do with the conspiracy Annette told you about? I think it did, though I can’t tell you why,

yet.”

“What about Emily?” Jack asked. “Have you heard anything about her?”

“No, I’m sorry to say I haven’t. But we’ve got lots of ears open, and we’re going to find out something, don’t you worry about that.”

“I do worry. Emily is not a mentally stable person, this experience could destroy her, even if she hasn’t been hurt physically.”

“So I understand. Look, Jack, you have my sympathy, but you’ve put the case into good hands, now, the best possible hands. I admit that my concern is primarily for this conspiracy deal, but there should be no conflict between us.

I want to get Emily back too. She’s a victim, and victims can’t help but learn a lot about the people who victimize them. Even if the Visitors don’t actually tell her anything, we can learn a lot from the kinds of questions they’ve asked her. That’s why she’s important to us.”

“I’m glad to hear that. But don’t give up on the establishment too quickly. Do you know David Mallard? I’ve told him about this, and he’d be willing to work with us, if we can get him the information he needs.” “Mallard’s a good man. Is he being watched?”

“I think so. The last time I talked with him, he wouldn’t even let me mention Emily.”

“A tricky situation, we’ll look into it and see if we can’t take the pressure off him a bit. Having the assistant attorney on our side could be a big help to us later. We know he’s clean.”

“I’m sure of that, but how can you be? Mallard thinks Oswald is clean.”

“It’s not the same thing. Oswald has done nothing to indicate any involvement with either the mob or Northampton, but there’s a lot about him we don’t know. Mallard, on the other hand, has never tried to keep a secret, doesn’t erect barriers around himself. We’re sure about him.”

“That’s a relief. But—I’m sorry to keep bringing this up—what about Emily? What are we going to do?” “Ultimately, we’re going to spring her. But first we

have to find out a lot more about her whereabouts, and then we'll

have to plan our action. Jack, I've put the whole network on this, because it seems to me that this might be just the break we've been waiting for. We've been putting things together, things that at first don't seem to bear any relationship to each other, and we're coming up with some interesting possibilities. It's been frustrating the last month or so, because my people here in Freeport seem to be losing their dedication. But two or three little bits of information may—just may—be a lead as to what happened to your friend. May I fix you another drink?"

"Please," Jack said, handing him the empty glass.

"Doug's right," Sally said. She had been sitting on the couch quietly the whole time. "We've known for a long time now that the Northampton Visitors have an espionage network in Freeport. We haven't been able to do anything about it yet. But kidnapping Emily might just prove their downfall." She paused while Jack accepted the fresh drink Abbot handed him.

"Because, you see," she went on, "a part of that network seems to be a secret prison camp, not that far from Freeport. We don't know what they do there, but little hints trickle out every now and then. But if the Visitors have Emily, then it's almost certain that they have her at that camp. Our problem is that we never had any idea of who they might have taken there, no way to track them down. They sneak people out of life for a moment, then sneak them back. All we know is that every now and then somebody shows up converted. But Emily was grabbed right out in the open. The mob is the weak link there. We're hoping it will break for us."

"How long have you been living on hints and suggestions?" Jack asked.

"Months? Years? We may not have that much time."

"That's true," Abbot said, "but we haven't been wasting time. As soon as Annette told us about you, even before she talked with you, we started working. Now those photos will be a help later. And we know as much about the kidnapping as anybody except the principals. That gives us something more to work on. And you, too, have been giving us leads, and an edge, and we're going to start moving just as soon as we can. Other people are already putting things together, but we can't do anything at all until we know where to move. What would you do? Where would you go? You have no idea. That's what we're

trying to find out. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do. It’s just ...”

“Emily is more than just a patient to you,” Sally said. “We know. But right now, there’s nothing we can do except look for a direction.”

“The important thing at the moment,” Douglas said, “is to make sure that our lines of communication are open. When it comes time to move, we may have to move instantly.” He took out a small notebook, scribbled something and tore off the page. “This is the number here,” he said. “There’ll be somebody here twenty-four hours, until further notice. If I’m not here, somebody will get word to me within fifteen minutes. Okay? And as for Annette, if you have any need to get in touch with her, it will be through me. She and her fifth columnists up in Northampton are doing their own thing, though we’re working together closely. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jack said. “But what do I do now?”

“Fake it. Go on about your everyday business as if nothing were wrong. Keep on asking around for Emily, you’ve made yourself just a bit conspicuous and if you shut

up now, people will wonder. Just don’t try too hard. We will let you know just as soon as we find out anything. Okay?” “All right,” Jack said. He was not completely satisfied with the outcome of this meeting, but he didn’t see what else he could do. He turned to Sally. “Do you need a lift anywhere?”

“No thanks, I’m fine. Get a good night’s sleep.”

“I’ll try,” Jack said, then he left.

File Thirteen: Thursday Morning

Jack did not, in fact, get a good night's sleep, and when he got to his office, a little before eight, he was groggy and fuzzy-headed. Mrs. McKinley handed him his coffee as he came in.

"Is that a new sweater?" Jack asked. It was a shade of red that people had stopped wearing ever since the Visitors had proved their true motives nearly three years ago.

"No, just an old one with some good use left in it. Have you found out anything about Miss Velasquez?"

"Nothing concrete," Jack said. "I've been talking to some people, I'm hoping they'll be able to find out where she is. Will you call WCTY for me please, I'd like to speak with Ms. Carpentier."

"Sure thing," she said, and he went on into his consulting room. The sweater bothered him. It was Visitor red, nobody wore that color these days.

The call went through but Carpentier's secretary told him Miss Carpentier wouldn't be in until eleven. Jack made an appointment for that time, then had to tell Mrs. McKinley to reschedule his client for that hour, and then it was time for Mrs. Van Patten.

When he was finished with his three clients of the morning he took the folder containing Emily's photos out of his desk and drove over to the Delmark Building. The receptionist upstairs told him that Ms. Carpentier was expecting him, and he was shown right in.

"Have you had any word from Emily yet?" she asked almost at once.

"I'm afraid not. I've tried several different approaches, but so far I have nothing to work on. With one exception. That man that Sorensen saw in the lobby downstairs the night Emily was kidnapped. Who was that man, Ms. Carpentier?"

"I can't tell you that," Carpentier said. "I promised to respect his

confidentiality.”

“Ms. Carpentier, there may be a life at stake here, maybe more than that. I don’t want to pry into this man’s affairs, but he saw Emily Monday night, he chased her out of the building, according to what Sorensen said, and at the very least, he may have seen something that could give me a lead.”

“I can assure you, he had nothing whatsoever to do with the kidnapping.”

“It doesn’t sound like that to me. I’m willing to grant the possibility, but I’d like to talk to him about it.”

“My reputation may also be at stake, Dr. Page. I have reason to regret, now, that I ever had anything to do with

Northampton. You may not be aware of it but relations between Freeport and Northampton are not as placid as they might seem—”

“I am aware of it, Ms. Carpentier.”

“We’re at truce now,” she went on, “but it could erupt into full scale conflict. I don’t want to see that happen. And further, there is certain technology which should not be made public. I’m sorry, Dr. Page, I just can’t do what you ask me to.”

“What does technology have to do with anything? I’m not an industry spy. I’m not going to talk to anybody about your precious technology.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Page, I just can’t.”

Jack looked at her a long moment and then sighed. He put the folder of photos down on the desk in front of her. “It’s because of these that Emily was kidnapped,” he said.

Carpentier opened the folder, saw the first picture, an exterior shot of the entrance of the Regency, and looked up at him in surprise.

“These are the pictures I gave you,” she said, “the ones Emily left here the other night.”

“Exactly. Most of them are innocuous enough. But look at the last three.”

She turned over the whole stack, and then turned up the bottom photo, the one showing the men’s backs as they hurried from the box.

“Who are these men?”

“The next one.”

She turned that one over, and just stopped moving, staring at the seven surprised faces.

“Interesting, isn’t it?” Jack asked mildly.

“Very.”

“You know who they are, of course.”

“Some of them, yes. Charles Anthony Oswald—I’ve never met him, but I know who he is. Vincent Kline— probably the second most famous face in Freeport, after Oswald. Some of the others. ...”

“And Dwight,” Jack said. “Out of uniform. In Freeport. That picture could hang him, even if he were the only one in it.”

“Yes,” Carpentier said, her voice small and faraway. “And Dwight.”

“You see why somebody wanted to shut Emily up. Wanted to find out how much she knew, whether she took those photos by accident or by plan, whether she’d told anybody about that picture. Each of those men, whatever else they might be up to, has a good reason to want to get that picture back.”

Carpentier looked up at him then, keeping out the critical picture, neatly stacked the photos and closed the folder. “The implications are frightening,” she said.

“They are. Now one of these men is responsible for Emily’s kidnapping. Look at those faces. When that flash went off, they must have thought they were caught for sure. The man who Emily ran from Monday night, he’s a part of those frightening implications. Who was he?”

“This one right here,” Carpentier said, pointing to one of the faces Jack didn’t recognize. “His name is Marty Patrushka. He was Dwight’s chief agent for the job I did up in Northampton six months ago.”

Jack let out his breath. “I’ve heard of Marty Patrushka,” he said. “Thank you, Ms. Carpentier, I hope you’ll believe me when I tell you that I won’t say any more about this than I absolutely have to, and in any event it certainly won’t be to the police.”

“Then who?”

“Let’s just say some concerned citizens who are as worried as you are about the state of affairs between Freeport and Northampton, and who want, as you do, to see things remain peaceful between the two cities.”

“The resistance.”

“We don’t yet know what’s going on,” Jack continued, “but we do know that Emily’s kidnapping is part of something bigger. Even if that were not the case, Kline at least has been trying to find these photos, that one in particular. He thought I had them, and sent three thugs to get them from me.” He flexed his gloved, false hand. “Even a cripple can defend himself if he knows how. But you should be aware that Kline might figure out that you had these photos for a while, when Emily left them here by mistake. If so, they might take steps to see that you never tell what you saw.”

“I appreciate your concern, Dr. Page. I’ll tell Ron Torino to beef up the security. They’re all good men, they’ll take care of me.”

“Unless they slip and fall coming down stairs.” Carpentier lowered her eyes and gazed at the photo on top of the folder. “I can’t see how Dwight can possibly be involved in this,” she said. “It has to be Kline.”

“I think it is,” Jack said, “but Dwight is right there.” He reached over and tapped the sardonically handsome face in the photo.

“So maybe Kline forced him to come. I’ve met Dwight, worked with him. If we weren’t on opposite sides, we might be friends. Kline probably forced Oswald too.”

“I tend to agree with you, though not everybody else does. But I have reason to believe that Northampton is involved in Emily’s kidnapping too, somehow.”

“I don’t see why, but I can believe it.”

“Ms. Carpentier, it doesn’t bother me, personally, that you worked for Northampton a while back. As far as I know, that was all aboveboard—unwise perhaps but a straight piece of work. But there could have been, without your knowing it, something wrong with that job, something criminal. Maybe you suspect that, maybe that’s why you want to disassociate yourself from it now.”

“You are very perceptive, Dr. Page.”

“That’s my job. If it bothers you, and you ever want to talk about it, on a professional level, let me know, I’ll give you a good referral.”

“I don’t need analysis to tell me what’s on my mind in that respect.”

“I’m sure you don’t.” He picked up the folder and slipped the incriminating picture into it. “You’ve told me what I needed to know,” he said. “I probably won’t have to talk to you again. But be careful. And think about things. If you remember something, about your meetings with Emily, about your job in Northampton, that might have a bearing on this business, please get in touch with me.”

“I hope you find Emily.”

“I hope so too—and that she’s alive when I do.”

He left and drove back to his office building. There was a cafeteria just off the main lobby, so he had lunch and then went on up to his floor. He stepped off the elevator into the lobby which served all the offices on his floor. A man, some distance away, turned away and leaned against the wall.

It was just a man, Jack told himself, no reason to be so jumpy. He wore a dark blue suit, and was otherwise unremarkable. Probably just waiting for somebody. But he had turned away so smoothly, so quickly, as if he had been watching for Jack’s return.

Jack went to his own office door, then hesitated and looked back at the man. He

was walking nonchalantly away, down the corridor. Maybe, Jack thought, it was just his anxiety, the secret meetings with the resistance, that was making him see enemies around every corner. He went into his reception room where Mrs. McKinley was working on the billing, her ever-present cup of coffee within easy reach. "Good afternoon, Dr. Page," she said with a smile. "Has anybody called or come in while I've been out?" "No, Doctor. I keep hoping the police will call back." "I don't think they will, Mrs. McKinley. When's my next appointment?"

File Fourteen: Thursday Afternoon

Jack continued with his clients until quarter to four. Mrs. McKinley informed him then that Mrs. Mitsushi had cancelled, and that he had nothing scheduled for the rest of the day.

Jack was just as glad. He found the piece of paper Douglas Abbot had given him, in his jacket pocket along with his right glove, which he always carried but seldom wore, called the resistance leader without going through Mrs. McKinley. Abbot agreed to meet him immediately at the Sanders Street house.

Annette met him at the door, wearing designer jeans and a man's sport shirt.

"Come on in," she said. "Good to see you again."

In the living room, Abbot was ready with a drink in his hand. Jack accepted it gratefully.

"You might want to keep an eye out," Jack said. "There was a man up in my lobby this afternoon, and he may have been watching me."

"Did he follow you here?"

"I don't think so, but then, I'm not skilled at that kind of thing."

"Well, let's just sit here, and I'll watch the street to see if anybody suspicious drives by." He gestured Jack onto the couch under the window and took a large chair opposite while Annette opened both the drapes and the curtains. "Was the man human or Visitor?"

"He was wearing a dark blue suit, but I didn't hear him speak."

"What's in the folder?" Abbot asked.

"Photos of the Regency Theater," Jack said, "but one in particular might be of interest to you." He took the shot with the seven men in the box out of the folder and handed it across to the resistance leader.

“Delightful,” Abbot said when he saw it. “Just delightful. If we ran this in the *Herald* all hell would break loose.”

“You wouldn’t really do that, would you?” Jack asked, surprised at the idea.

“Only if it seemed like the best thing to do.” He handed the photo back, and Annette came over to sit beside Jack and look at the picture.

“I know him,” she said, pointing to a solid-looking man with Amerindian features who was standing next to Dwight. “His name’s Hickory, he’s a Visitor.”

“From Freeport or Northampton?” Jack asked. Abbot got up and came over to look.

“Northampton. So, since he’s dressed like a civilian, he was here illegally too.” Hickory was shorter than Dwight, wearing a nondescript suit, holding his belt buckle with his left hand. “I was able to check out all the passes that have been issued to Northampton Visitors during the last two weeks,” Annette went on, “and neither Dwight nor Hickory are listed.”

“This one here,” Jack said, pointing, “is named Marty Patrushka. He was Dwight’s agent when he had Vanessa Carpentier up to Northampton to help install a TV station, but I also know he’s an associate of Kline’s. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Not right offhand,” Abbot said, going back to his chair so he could watch the window. “But we’ll check it out. We’ll also check into Carpentier, too. We kept an eye on her when she was in Northampton six months ago, and as far as we can tell everything was aboveboard, if a bit—how shall I say it—not according to general practice?”

“Could she possibly be involved in this business?” Jack asked.

“I don’t think so. What I do think is that each of our three principals—Kline, Oswald, and Dwight—were there voluntarily, and are in league with each other. Look at those expressions, all of them guilty.”

“I suppose so. Why would they meet in secret like that? I mean, would Northampton be likely to include humans in an anti-human conspiracy?”

“Northampton,” Annette said, “doesn’t include humans in anything at all, if they can help it.”

“That’s what I thought,” Jack went on. “Yet there they are. Now what would this meeting imply if it had been held somewhere in Northampton? That somehow Dwight had forced both Oswald and Kline to come up to see him, right?”

“Yeah,” Abbot said.

“Okay, but the meeting was down here, so it seems to me that *Kline* forced Oswald and Dwight to meet *him*. Make sense?”

“I guess so,” Abbot said dubiously.

“So Kline is the key,” Jack went on. “Kline would have plenty of reason to try to make Oswald put pressure on the D. A. to drop the conspiracy to defraud charges, or maybe to get a handle on Oswald’s banking and other business. And Kline might be getting help from Dwight, easing up on inspections to facilitate his black market shipments back and forth from Freeport to Northampton and other Visitor-controlled areas.”

“I don’t see that,” Annette said. “I mean, Kline might want that, but what could he offer Northampton in return?” “I don’t know, Annette, I’m just speculating.” He took a long pull at his drink. “Have you been able to find out anything about Emily?”

“We know where she is, I think. That is, we’ve identified that secret prison we told you about. It’s right here in Freeport, can you believe it? If she’s alive, then that’s where they’d be keeping her.”

“That’s incredible,” Jack said. “How would they dare operate a prison here, in Freeport?”

“That’s just it,” Abbot said. “It’s so audacious, nobody would think they would do it. But it also implies that Visitors have more freedom and influence here than we have thought. If we can get evidence of this to the proper authorities, we could bust them right open. We’d get help from up north, and the Visitors would

be in a most uncomfortable position.”

“I’d like to see that,” Jack said. “But where is this prison?”

“In the east part of town,” Annette said, “out by the mouth of the bay.”

“And they’ve been running this thing,” Abbot said, “for who knows how long, right in our laps. I knew our organization here was getting lax, but this is ridiculous.” “But we know about it now,” Jack said. “When do we move?”

“We’ve set a target date for Sunday night,” Abbot said. “But that’s three days from now,” Jack protested. “Why wait so long?”

“This has got to be done carefully,” Annette said. “We want to check everything out, alternative entrances and exits and so on.”

“We also,” Abbot said, “want to find out more about the tenants, what their habits are, when they’re most likely to be gone.”

“The building’s not empty?” Jack asked.

“No,” Annette said. “It really is a most clever set-up. Most of the building is offices and the like, used by humans, and only the top floors are the prison itself.”

“My God,” Jack said. “They really are bold, aren’t they.”

“They are indeed,” Abbot said. “But we can be bold too. We’ve been able to contact some of the Visitor staff of the prison, and we may have some inside help.”

“That’s another reason,” Annette said, “that we want to hold off a bit before we act. We want to check these people out, make sure they’re really with us.”

“One of our biggest problems,” Abbot said, “is that there are very few people in Freeport, even among our resistance group, who have had any kind of combat experience. So we have to be careful who we take with us.” “Another thing,” Annette went on, “is that we don’t want to just barge in there, guns blazing. The best thing

would be to take Emily out as quickly and as quietly as possible. We don't want to endanger any innocents." "And," Abbot said, "we don't want to blow anybody's cover, fifth columnist or rebel."

"All right," Jack said, "you're the experts. Is there anything more I can do right now?"

"Not at the moment," Abbot said as Jack put the photo back in its folder with the others. "We'll be in touch." He got up from his chair. He and Annette walked with Jack to the door, and Jack was surprised when they came out with him, as if they were leaving too.

"Don't you live here?" Jack asked.

"No," Abbot said. "I know the people who do, and they're on vacation for the month. Even if we were traced here, we've left the place to look like a break-in. We'll fix that, of course, before we leave for good."

"Ah-ha."

Jack went to his car, but as he put his hand on the door, a man came out from beside the house, a gun in his hand.

It was Rudy Salanis. His face was swollen from the beating Jack had given him. He didn't seem to see Abbot and Annette, his concentration was focused exclusively on Jack.

"Nobody beats me up and gets away with it, shrink," Salanis said, flashing a fast grin on his battered face. He raised the gun.

A shot rang out, but it was not from Salanis's gun. The right side of Salanis's head erupted in a fountain of blood, and he fell, slowly, to the driveway.

Jack, half paralyzed, turned toward Douglas Abbot, who was lowering a forty-five automatic.

"Now we've got trouble," Abbot said calmly. "This is a neighborhood crime-watch area, and they're careful here.

That's why we chose this place. The police will be here any minute."

“What do we do?” Jack asked, almost automatically.

“Just leave him here and drive away. Who was he, do you know?”

“His name was Rudy Salanis. He was one of the guys who tried to mug me the other day.”

“One less mobster to worry about,” Abbot said with a calm that sent chills up Jack’s spine. “All right, this might change things. We’d better meet again later on this evening. Say midnight, at the apartment building on Pine where Annette first contacted you. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jack said, numb from reaction.

“Let’s go, then,” Annette said, nowhere near as calm as Douglas Abbot. Jack got in his car and backed out of the driveway. Abbot and Annette, in another car, followed immediately. Jack drove off south, while Abbot turned north. As he drove away, Jack heard the sound of police sirens.

File Fifteen: Thursday Evening

Jack felt sick as he drove east on Orson toward his home. It was reaction to the sudden killing of Rudy Salanis. In his mind's eye, he kept seeing the side of the man's head erupting in blood and brains.

Come on, he said to himself, straighten up. He'd seen a lot of death in Viet Nam, scenes a lot worse than Salanis's killing. He remembered the horror of losing his own left arm. A friend who'd been hit by a mortar shell. Women and children three days dead. All of that had been far worse.

But this killing was different somehow. He fought to keep his stomach down, tasting the sour in the back of his throat. He owed Abbot his life. The chunky little man had acted with incredible swiftness. It had been a matter of fractions of a second.

But Abbot had been so cold about it, so deliberate, so calm afterwards. It was that, Jack realized as he turned south on Calvin, that was disturbing him now. It was one thing to kill in self-defense, or in the heat of battle, or filled with rage. It was another to just calmly put a gun to another man's head and squeeze the trigger.

Had Jack been fooling himself for the last three years? He'd been going along, tending to his clients, trying to help them resolve their anxieties about the world around them. God knew they had reason enough to be anxious. The aliens had destroyed property, killed thousands in combat, enslaved whole populations, eaten people. The person who wasn't anxious about that had a real problem.

Douglas Abbot had been active in the resistance the whole time. He'd fought, he'd learned to be hard, he'd had to kill before. Jack, on the other hand, had just been sitting by. He'd been helping people, but their anxieties were only a symptom of an underlying disease—occupation by reptilian aliens. Maybe Jack should have been doing something about the cause, instead.

It worried him that those symptoms of Alien Anxiety Syndrome seemed to have been diminishing drastically lately. That didn't make sense, especially in Freeport. If alien and human had begun resolving their differences, it would be

reasonable for people to stop worrying about the situation. But Freeport was an island of humanity, with the strongest-held Visitor city ten minutes away across the bay. The symptoms of A AS should be increasing. Had everybody gotten so used to the Visitors that they no longer cared?

He pulled into his driveway at last and sat there for a moment. His placid life was over. He was involved with the resistance, hunted by the mob, and things would not be the same until this problem was resolved. His only other choice would be to leave town and start over somewhere else. A coward's way. He touched the signal button on his dash, and the garage door went up. He pulled in, the door came down, and he went into his house.

It wasn't fear of being a coward, however, that kept him going. It was his need to rescue Emily. He had no idea how she felt about him, but that didn't matter, not right now. He had a job to do, and the acceptance of that fact calmed his stomach.

He walked as if in a dream through the kitchen, the living room, and down the hall to his bedroom where he dropped the folder of photos on the nightstand. If he was going to try to rescue Emily, there would be violence. There could be no avoiding the danger, the risk, the possible need to kill. Was he prepared to face that? Could he kill again? If the roles had been reversed, and it were Abbot's life on the line, could Jack just reach up and pull a trigger? Could he do so to save Emily's life? His own?

The house felt different somehow. It wasn't the house, he realized, but himself. Without being aware of it, he had reached a conclusion. He'd been a soldier. He knew how to kill. He could do it again if he had to.

One of his three bedrooms was used for storage. He kept things there that he didn't want to trust to the dust of the attic or the damp of the crawlspace under the house. He went there, and though he hadn't thought about it since his discharge, he knew exactly where his gun was. He took it out of the back of the bottom drawer of the old dresser. Its weight, its lethality, reassured him.

Calm, now, he took the gun into the kitchen and, though it was not dark, turned on the light over the table. He spread newspapers on the table, fixed himself a drink, then took his gun apart. He cleaned it, oiled it, put it back together, made sure it was working properly.

He had no permit for the gun. As if that mattered, here and now. He loaded it carefully, checked the action. It was smooth. He made sure he had plenty of extra ammunition, then he fixed himself another drink.

He had not had time for supper yet. He was not hungry, but he would be later. Whatever happened at their midnight rendezvous, he would need the energy, so he fixed himself a steak, french fries, sliced tomatoes and red onions.

He tried not to think about anything while he cooked, and while he ate. He kept his mind blank, and forced himself to go through little tension-relieving exercises he taught to his clients. It was going to be a late night, and the best thing he could do right now would be to get some sleep, though it was still early.

He turned off the kitchen light and went through the darkening house to his bedroom. There he took off his shoes, and started to undress, but decided against it and just lay down on top of the bed. He stared at the ceiling for a long moment, then got up and, still in the dark, went back to the kitchen to fix himself a good stiff drink. He took a sip, carried it back to the bedroom, then thought about his gun still on the kitchen table. He put the drink down on the nightstand, went back for his gun, and put it down beside the glass.

He piled pillows up behind his head on the bed, and lay there, not really thinking about anything. He sipped his scotch quickly, and by the time he finished the tranquilizing effect of the alcohol was making him drowsy. He put the glass aside and let sleep wash over him.

It was not a deep sleep. His head kept buzzing with halfformed dream images. He felt his body, lying on the bed, numb, lethargic. Black vibrating velvet waves of true sleep slathered across his mind. And then he started wide awake. His body, still in the paralysis of sleep, was distant from

him.

He listened. The house was silent—no, a soft thud. A footstep? Had he forgotten to lock the garage door when he'd come in?

He opened his eyes. The bedroom was totally dark, the hall beyond the bedroom door was dark, there were no gleams from the living room. Was that another thud? Quietly, he got out of bed, went down the pitch-black hall in his stocking feet, and stopped just short of the living room.

The front door was ajar. And from his study at the other side of the living room came the unmistakable sounds of footsteps. The burglar alarm should have gone off. The intruder was no amateur.

Before he could decide what to do, a man came out of the study, moving surely in the darkness, coming across the living room so dimly illuminated by the streetlights passing through the curtains. Jack felt his hair stand on end, his stomach clench. The man did not see him here, in the darkness of the hall, but went instead toward the kitchen. He was holding something in his hand. As he passed through the kitchen door his face was illuminated by the dim light coming from the kitchen window in back. It was an ugly, pig-like face. The thing in his hand was a gun.

Jack backed up a step, the infinitesimal susurrations of his stocking feet on the carpet sounding as loud in his ears as a snake's hiss. He cursed himself silently for not having anticipated something like this. He went back to his bedroom, careful not to bump the walls. He could just see the position of his nightstand, and went to it, almost stumbling over his shoes. He picked up his gun, made sure the safety was off, and turned back to the door.

Ryan Hadly was standing just inside the doorway. "God damn," Hadly muttered as he brought his gun hand up. Jack calmly raised his own gun, quickly, straight out in front of him, and fired once. In the flash, he could see Hadly's surprised and ugly face. Hadly's gun went off twice, into the floor, and then he fell.

Jack didn't want to turn on a light, so he raised a window shade to see by. Hadly lay face down, a black pool spreading from around his head. Quickly, Jack went to his closet, pulled out a suitcase, and stuffed it with socks and underwear from his dresser, shirts and slacks and a jacket from the closet, and the folder of photos from the nightstand. He pulled on his shoes, then, carrying the suitcase, stepped over Hadly's motionless body into the hall.

As he strode toward the kitchen he thought about calling the police. It was a pure case of self defense, trapped in his bedroom by an armed intruder. The police would find out about the killing anyway, and if he didn't report it, he would be in deep trouble.

But he couldn't trust the police. He'd be questioned, held for hours, possibly even charged with manslaughter. Worse, they might decide he was too

dangerous, and find they had to kill him while he “escaped.”

Without a step's hesitation he passed by the phone at the kitchen door and went out through the back door into the garage. No, he'd just have to ride this out alone, and hope he could set things straight later. He pulled out of the garage, and headed toward town.

File Sixteen: Thursday Night— Friday Morning

As Jack drove up Wade through downtown Freeport he got an idea. At Wall Street he turned east. A couple of doors down from the corner was an all-night photocopy place. He pulled into an empty parking space and took the folder of photos out of the suitcase in the back seat.

He paid seventy cents each for several high quality copies of the three significant photos. The store also provided a mail service, so he bought an envelope, put in the three originals—keeping the other photos to give back to Emily, or to Dahlgren—and wrote a brief note to David Mallard. He explained what had happened so far, and that he was going into hiding. Then he addressed the envelope to Mallard's home, bought some stamps, and handed the envelope to the clerk. He folded the copies and put them in his inside jacket pocket, then went back out to his car. With the rest of the photos on the seat beside him, he drove around the block and back to Wade Avenue. A block and a half later he pulled up in front of the Carter House hotel.

He sat there for ten minutes, watching the traffic moving by, to see who else might come in, who might have followed him this far. Aside from a few hookers and other more or less innocent pedestrian traffic, there was nothing suspicious. When he was satisfied that he had escaped detection, he pulled the car around into the parking deck adjacent to the hotel.

The Carter House was an inexpensive place, and a bit worn, but it was clean. Jack checked in at the desk, calling himself Benjamin Steel, and paid for one night with cash. He didn't know how clever his enemies were and didn't want to use his credit cards which would have left a record of his name.

The clerk did not object to cash, but Jack was running short. He'd have to get more tomorrow. He went straight up to his room, tossed the suitcase on the bed, and sat in a chair in front of the TV set. He didn't turn it on.

He'd just killed a man. Did he feel guilty? No. Nor nauseated, as he had been after Salanis's killing. He took his gun out of his pocket and held it in his lap.

There would be no more sleep for him tonight. He sat in the chair, waiting.

At last it was eleven thirty, and taking only his gun and the copies of the photos, he went down to his car. As he crossed the bridge to the parking deck he kept alert for movement in the shadows, men standing too casually nearby. There was nothing.

He drove west along Clyne, through the downtown area, the apartment buildings, the built up residential area to Pine, where he turned north. He parked a few doors down from the apartment building and went in. Sally Greenstreet was waiting in the lobby for him. She must have seen something in his face, because her smile of greeting faded to somber silence.

"We're upstairs," she said as she walked with him to the elevator. She punched the button for the seventh floor.

Abbot was there, waiting for them. His face, too, was grim. "I just got a call," he said. "Annette has been arrested, by her own people."

"Oh, shit," Sally said, "how could that happen? On what grounds?"

"Treason, probably," Abbot said. "What matters is that they arrested her now, instead of earlier. All Naturals are considered traitors, so they must have had some special reason for picking her up."

"How did it happen?" Jack asked.

"As far as we know," Abbot said, "some Visitors in civilian clothes came down from Northampton earlier this evening, about ten o'clock or so. They broke into her apartment and took her away."

"Were there witnesses?" Sally asked, her voice tight with shock.

"Her boyfriend, another Natural, was in the bedroom. They didn't even bother to search her apartment, so they never knew he was there. Maybe they didn't care."

"I can't believe it," Jack said. "How can they dare to come into Freeport that way?"

"They must be desperate. It's not just a matter of keeping track of her

movements and then picking her up some time when she's out of safe territory. The fact that they took that chance, right now when we're starting to move on them, tells me that their conspiracy is very important to them indeed."

"But why Annette?" Sally asked. "I mean, there are others who are more involved in this than she was." "Somebody pointed a finger," Abbot said. "And Northampton—not just a few isolated individuals—decided she could tell them something. That's my guess."

"What will happen to her?" Jack asked.

"She'll be interrogated, but whether in Northampton or somewhere else I couldn't tell you. Our network of fifth columnists in Northampton are keeping their ears open." "It's too much of a coincidence," Jack said, and told them about Ryan Hadly.

"So we know the mob is getting desperate too," Abbot said. "I wish I knew what the hell the connection between Kline and Northampton was."

"That's one of the things we're going to find out," Sally said. She turned to Jack. "You're not going back home tonight, are you?"

"Not with a dead man on my bedroom floor. I'm staying at the Carter House, under the name of Benjamin Steel, room 903. On my way there I made copies of the Regency photos, and sent the originals to David Mallard."

"Good thinking," Abbot said. "We need all the backup we can get. In fact, with Annette captured, and you probably being looked for by the police by now, we'd probably better not wait until Sunday to make our move. Northampton might decide to shut down their prison, or Annette might talk and give the show away. If we're going to get Emily out, we'd better do it tonight."

"I'm for it," Jack said, more relieved by the decision to act than concerned about the possible consequences.

Abbot went over to the phone and started calling his people. But after an hour of short, sharp, and sometimes

angry conversations, only two members of Abbot's resistance team had agreed to come.

“I can’t understand it,” Abbot said bitterly. “What the hell’s the matter with these people? It’s like they’ve completely lost interest.”

“I’ve been noticing that myself,” Sally said. “It’s funny, people don’t seem to hate the Visitors so much these days.” “Can we do the job, just the five of us?” Jack asked. “We’re damn well going to give it a try. Okay, it’s after one. We’ll leave here separately, and each go our own way. We’ll meet at the K & K Cafe on Howe. That’s right near the prison. Be there by two, we’ll move as soon as we’re altogether, or by two thirty at the latest. Okay?” “Whatever you say,” Jack said.

“Are you ready for this, Jack?” Abbot asked with sincere concern. “There may be some shooting.”

“There’s already been some shooting. I’ve got a gun.” “All right. Ah, I don’t mean to be crude, but you’ve got only one arm. Can you take care of yourself?”

“I fended off Salanis, Hadly, and another guy all right, remember?”

“Right. Okay, we’ll probably have just this one chance. If we blow it tonight, they’ll move the prison and take Emily somewhere else. So this has got to be good.”

“I didn’t lose this arm playing games,” Jack said, raising the black gloved hand. “We took out a Viet Cong command post that night.”

“Then let’s get moving,” Abbot said, and he was the first to leave.

File Seventeen: Friday Morning

Jack had forty minutes to kill, so he drove a roundabout way to the K & K Cafe. He kept a careful eye out for tails, but as far as he could tell, nobody was following him.

He got to the cafe just at two. Douglas Abbot and Sally Greenstreet were already there, in a booth at the back, having arrived just minutes before. With them was another woman, a tall, bosomy woman in her early thirties, with her dark blond hair tied back from her face. She wore jeans, a subdued plaid shirt, and was introduced to Jack as Jenifer MacAlister.

“I think we’re going to be able to pull it off,” Abbot said as Jack sat down. “Jenifer has been working on making contacts inside the prison from the moment we knew where it was.”

“Most of the prison staff are humans,” Jenifer went on, “but a few are Visitors, and two of them have been known to us for some time as potential fifth columnists. We didn’t know where they were working until today. I was hoping they could get some floorplans, but there just wasn’t time.” “What kind of humans would work in a place like that?” Sally asked.

“They’re all connected with the mob one way or another,” Jenifer told her. “The Visitors there don’t much like the company they’re keeping.”

“I don’t blame them,” a heavy-set man in his late forties said, coming up to their booth. He was blond but balding, and wearing slacks and a designer workshirt. Abbot introduced him as Tom Sarbin, the last of their team.

“I’ve checked out all the streets around the prison building,” Sarbin said. “The best way in seems to be from the alley. I should be able to get us in without setting off any alarms.”

“That would be nice,” Jack said. “But then what?” “We shouldn’t have any trouble,” Jenifer said, “getting up to the top floors where the prison is. Once more, our contacts will let us into the prison proper. But we’re going to have to make this raid as quick and clean as possible. We don’t want to get our contacts

in trouble, or put them into any more danger than we have to.”

“What about other prisoners?” Sarbin asked.

“If we can do anything for them,” Abbot said, “without endangering the rest of the operation, we will. Otherwise, we’ll just have to leave them there. There aren’t enough of us for a full-scale breakout.”

“No matter how careful we are,” Sally said, “they’ll know that their security has been penetrated. Why not just damage the place as much as possible before we go?” “With what?” Jenifer asked. “We have no explosives

tonight, no equipment but our guns. If we just sneak Emily out, the blame is likely to fall on the guards. But if we try to do a lot of damage, then our contacts will come under suspicion.”

“Quick and clean,” Abbot said, “that’s the way it’s got to be. We’ll free other prisoners if it’s possible and seems like a good idea, but the important point is to get Emily Velasquez out of there, and alive.”

“And about time too,” Jack said. “When do we move?” “Right now,” Abbot said. “We’ve done all the planning we can. But let’s get there the same way we got here. We don’t want to look like a mob, and maybe arouse the interest of our fine police.”

Tom left first, to give himself time to get the alley door opened. Sally followed soon after, then Jenifer, then Jack and Abbot together.

They walked up Howe to Bay Shore, then east along the front of the building where Lewis worked. South again, along Holiday, with the desolate night beach on their left, to the alley behind Lewis’s building. Up the alley, then to a recessed service door.

“This is it,” Abbot said. “The rest of this place is nothing, but the top three floors are held by a dummy corporation. ”

“The prison’s up there?” Jack asked. “But Lewis works here, I told you about him.”

“You’ve been here before?” Abbot asked.

“Yes, just the other day, when I asked Lewis to keep his ears open for word of Emily. That’s how Annette got onto me.”

“Right, dammit. Don’t worry about Lewis, we won’t get him into any trouble.” He reached for the latch of the service door, and it opened at once. Tom Sarbin was waiting just inside. He led them through back corridors to where Sally was standing by a service elevator.

“it doesn’t go all the way to the top,” Sally explained, “just to the floor right below the prison. Jenifer is up there now.”

The four got in the elevator and took it as high as it would go. Jenifer met them in a service corridor. From there she led them by back ways to a small janitorial supply room near the center of the building. Right next to it, around a corner, were the main elevators.

They went into the supply room and turned on the lights. After a few moments wait there was a discreet knock on the door. Jenifer opened it and let in two Visitors, Samuel and Rosalind, both in red uniforms.

“We’ll do our best to leave you clean,” Abbot told them. “Now how do we get upstairs?”

“The elevators don’t go there anymore, ” Rosalind said. “All the fire and service stairs are locked, and they can only be opened from the inside. There’s one set of stairs that the human staff uses at the back. We’ve left it unlocked.” “All right. Now how about offices?”

“All administration is on the floor right above us,” Samuel said. “All that’s up there is the records on the seven people we have now.”

“Even those could be informative,” Abbot insisted, “we’ll check it out.”

“After we get Emily,” Jack said.

“No. Records first. Look, a secret prison like this has to tie in with other things that we’ve been working on for years. And there has to be some reason for it being right here, some reason for Northampton to take the risk of being discovered. ”

“You’re right,” Rosalind said. “Samuel and I supervise the human staff. And there’s a lot of them, not just warders and guards.”

“What I think,” Samuel said, “is that they’re doing experiments of some kind. Somebody will be brought in in the middle of the night, kept only a few hours, a few days at most, and then released again, taken back to where they were gotten.”

“They’re drugged,” Rosalind went on. “When those poor people get home, they probably don’t even remember that they’ve been here. Samuel and I are pretty far down in the ranks, but every now and then we hear something, like whether a test went well or not.”

“That’s exactly why I want to take a look at those records,” Abbot said. “Whatever it is they’re up to, I want to find out more about it.”

“I agree,” Jack said, “but that’s an extra. We came here to get Emily, dammit.”

“I’m sorry,” Abbot said, “but this is bigger than one person, however much she might be able to tell us.” “Doug is right,” Sally said. Jenifer MacAlister and Tom Sarbin nodded agreement. “We don’t know how useful Emily will be to us.”

“It’s bound to be a lot less than what those records can tell us,” Sarbin said.

“All right,” Jack capitulated. “Let’s get it over with.” Jenifer put her ear to the door, listened a moment, then stepped back, a look of alarm on her face. “Someone’s coming,” she whispered. Samuel reached behind her shoulder and turned out the lights. After a moment they could hear footsteps, then someone grasped the outside doorknob. The door opened inward, a man was momentarily outlined against the night light of the corridor beyond, and then four pairs of hands grabbed him, pulled him in, and the door slammed shut.

The light came on. It was Lewis, dressed for work. His eyes were wide with shock and fear, and his mouth worked silently, the reptile tongue flickering spasmodically.

Abbot and Sarbin had their guns raised, ready to bring them down on Lewis’s head. “Wait,” Jack barked. “It’s Lewis,, he’s all right?”

“Sure he is,” Abbot said, but he lowered his gun. “So how did he know to find us

here?” Sarbin brought his gun down too, but kept it pointed at Lewis’s head.

“It’s my closet,” Lewis said, his voice frantic. “I had to do some extra work, the regular night man called in sick.”

“How convenient,” Sarbin said.

“Come off it,” Jack said. “I’ve known Lewis a long time, he is a hard worker, this is exactly the kind of thing he would do.”

“All right, Jack, if you say so. But we can’t just leave him here.”

“Why not?” Lewis asked. “You can come into my building if you want to. Jack, what the hell’s going on?”

“Emily’s upstairs,” Jack said.

“You’re kidding. But—”

“The top three floors,” Jack went on, “are a secret prison and experimental lab run by the people in Northampton.”

“How can that be? Jack, I’ve been working here for over two years, I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“You ever been up there?” Tom Sarbin asked.

“No, no, the Benedict Company contract for their own custodial service, outside the building.”

“That’s right,” Samuel said, “except it’s all mobsters and thugs, not a regular janitorial service.”

“You ever see Lewis up there?” Abbot asked.

“Never,” Rosalind said.

“Jack,” Lewis said, “are you sure Emily is up there? How did they bring her in? Do you have passes?” he asked, turning to Rosalind, then Samuel.

“Take it easy,” Jack said. “The whole operation upstairs is totally illegal.”

“And yes,” Jenifer said, “we’re sure Emily is there.” “Right in my own building,” Lewis muttered. “All this time and I never knew it.”

“There’s a lot more going on,” Abbot said, “than you might guess. And, unfortunately, you’re going to find out about some of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re going up there, and we’re going to take you with us. You understand, Lewis, I just can’t trust you, at least, not until we’ve finished what we came here for.”

With Lewis in the middle of the group, they left the custodial supply room. Rosalind led them by a different route to the back of the building, to a stairwell there. It was open to the floor below, but the stairs to the next floor up were closed off with a newly installed fire door. Rosalind did something with the latch, and after a few seconds the door slid aside.

They went up to the floor above, and out into a corridor. “This is all administration and interrogation,” Samuel | explained. “Rosalind and I seldom come down here. Mostly we work on the next floor up.”

“Where are the main offices?” Abbot asked.

“I don’t know for sure,” Rosalind said, “but I think they’re over this way.” They followed her to where the corridor teed into a broader hallway, with doors up and down both sides. Rosalind took a case of magnetic card keys from the pocket of her uniform. “I was lucky,” she said. “But the guy I stole these from this evening might find them missing. If he does, he could come back here to look for them. We’ll have to work fast.”

Rosalind went to the first door on the right and unlocked it. The room beyond was totally unintelligible to Jack. They didn’t go in.

“Not here,” Rosalind said as she closed the door again. “Let’s try the other way.”

The next room Rosalind looked into appeared to be some kind of laboratory. “That’s better,” she said, but again she backed out without letting the others enter. They moved down the hallway and toward the end she opened a third door.

“Okay,” she said, looking around what seemed to be just an ordinary reception room. “I’ve worked at other prisons and camps before, and they’re all laid out pretty much the same. So now I think I know where we are.” They left that room, too, and Rosalind led them to the end of the hallway and through a double door into a cross corridor. Once more, she unlocked the first door on the right.

“You want records?” she said, standing aside so the others could enter. “This is it.”

In the middle of the room was a desk, with three computer monitors set into the surface. Other monitors stood at smaller desks on either side. Between these, and all along the back were steel cabinets with no drawers or doors.

“You know how to work these?” Tom Sarbin asked her.

“I think so,” she said.

“Then let’s get to it.”

While Rosalind and Tom Sarbin figured out how to access the computerized files, Samuel and Sally Greenstreet kept watch at the door, with Lewis between them. Douglas

Abbot started pulling open drawers in the desk and riffling through their contents. Jack just stood back and watched.

After a while Abbot, having found nothing of interest, went to check out some of the cabinets, and look through the smaller console desks. Meanwhile, Rosalind and Sarbin had discovered the filing method, and were now reading through a long menu.

“Here it is,” Sarbin said. On the screen were a jumble of alien characters, but one line was written in English. “Emily Velasquez” was all it said, all it needed to say.

“Let’s print out the whole file,” Rosalind said.

“Might as well get all the others, too,” Sarbin suggested.

Rosalind went to one of the side consoles, flipped a switch, and keyed in a

command. Immediately, one of the cabinets next to the console opened up, and sheets of paper began to drop down onto a receiving tray.

Rosalind had instructed the computer to print out all the prisoner files, and they came in numerical rather than alphabetical order. Emily's was the third, and as soon as its pages started falling into the receiving tray, Jack took them out and read them.

Much of it was written in the alien's language, with only occasional passages in English. But at the top of each page was Emily's name, and some symbols. He showed it to Rosalind.

"That's Emily's cell number," she said. "It will be two floors up, above services."

"All right, Abbot," Jack said. "When this stuff stops printing out, let's go get Emily."

"Not so fast, Jack," Abbot said. He was standing over another side console. Sarbin was seated at the keyboard, and the printer next to it was spewing out more paper.

"We're going to take all we can. Rosalind, let that thing run and get another console working."

"What do you want?" she asked, sitting down at the console next to where Emily's record had been produced.

"Anything that might give us some clue as to what the experiments are all about."

"All right," she said, and started typing instructions. Sarbin, since he could read a little bit of the Visitor's language, had moved to the next console over, and did the same.

"God damn it," Jack said, "we've got to get moving. This place might be patrolled."

"It is," Samuel said from the door.

“This is our only chance,” Abbot insisted. “We take everything we can get, and then we run.”

When all four printer consoles were going, Abbot and Rosalind sat down at the main desk and searched the master directory for anything else that could be spooled to the first printer that finished. To Jack, it seemed to take forever, and the stacks of printout got higher and higher.

“How are we going to carry all this stuff?” he asked. “With these,” Jenifer said. She took a strong plastic bag with a drawstring out of her hip pocket. “Why don’t you start stuffing, Jack?”

“Anything to get this show on the road,” Jack muttered. By the time he had four of the bags filled, each with over a thousand sheets of printout, the printers stopped. Abbot and Sally had been looking through them, hoping to find something they could understand right away. Most of the printouts were in the alien’s language, others, while in English, were in a kind of shorthand or code, and few were readable, and even those were unintelligible.

Jack stuffed the last of the printouts in a fifth bag, and as he did so, one of the pages caught his eye. It was the words, “extra low frequency radiation.” He’d kept Emily’s file handy, and he looked at that again. One paragraph seemed to be saying that she was ignorant of the implications of ELF—extra low frequency—and there was something more about its effects on the body and human mind, but the language here, though English, was esoteric jargon, and he could make little sense of it.

“What have you got, Jack?” Abbot asked.

“I’m not sure. ELF is the kind of radiation a human brain emits all the time, among other things.” He showed Rosalind the paragraph he’d just been reading. “Does this make any sense to you?”

As she read, he looked at the next page, which said quite clearly that Emily’s testimony, even under truth serum, was not to be trusted, since she couldn’t distinguish between truth and falsehood. Not quite right, Jack thought, but near enough.

Abbot, who with Tom Sarbin looking over his shoulder, was reading the other file which had first caught Jack’s attention, looked up. “This sounds like mind

reading,” he said.

“Good for them,” Jack said, “let them chase fantasies for a while.”

“You haven’t been keeping up with the literature,” Sally said. “The University of Chicago had definitely demonstrated latent psi talents in a number of Visitor volunteers.”

“You’ve got it wrong,” Sarbin said, “this is about mind control, not telepathy.”

“We’ll figure it out later,” Jack said. “Okay, Abbot, you’ve got what you wanted, now let’s go get Emily, before it’s too late.”

“He’s right, Doug,” Sally said. “We’ve been here far too long already.”

“Okay,” Abbot said. “Shut everything down and let’s go-”

They left the office but at the double doors leading to the main hallway they could hear male human voices talking.

“Guards,” Samuel whispered. “They’ll be coming this way.”

They backtracked to the data office, then beyond it to the last room on the corridor. Rosalind let them in and locked the door behind them.

Though there were few lights in here, and all of them set low to accommodate the Visitors’ visual requirements, they could see that they were in an interrogation room. Four ugly chairs stood spaced around the middle of the floor. Each was equipped with straps, wires, headpieces, and probes. Electronic devices were mounted on the back and sides of each chair, and connected to other devices lining the walls. Glass-fronted cabinets contained peculiar and somehow disturbing medical equipment.

“Let’s not wait here,” Samuel said, pointing to a door at the back. Quickly, quietly, they hurried out the far exit. The door closed behind them just as they heard the corridor entrance being unlocked.

“Conversion system,” Rosalind whispered as they passed a complicated console in front of a glass-enclosed booth. Control panels lined the walls on either side.

“More than that,” Samuel murmured, pointing to an interrogation chair like those in the outer room, but with more complex wiring and more connections of a vaguely obscene nature.

“A lot of good these documents are going to do us,” Jack said, hefting one of the bulging plastic bags, “if we’re caught in here.” Abbot’s jaw muscles twitched, but he said nothing. Instead, he looked around the room, then went to a panel which proved to be a door to a small closet.

“Everybody inside,” he said, “and try not to breathe.”

The closet, filled with unidentifiable equipment and supplies, was barely big enough for all of them. They could hear the guards crossing the interrogation chamber, coming toward the conversion room. As quietly as possible, they shifted and pressed together until Abbot could close the door—almost. It just wouldn’t latch. The door to the conversion room opened and the two guards, both human by the sound of their voices, came in.

File Eighteen: Friday Morning

The guards moved around the room, coming closer to the closet door. "This place gives me the creeps," one of them said.

"Just be glad they're not going to run you through that machine," the other answered, his words just barely audible, as if his back were turned to them.

After a moment the footsteps went away, but they could not hear the door to the interrogation room close.

They waited there, in the darkness, muscles cramping, trying not to breathe too loudly. "All right," Samuel whispered at last. He was pressed up against Abbot, right by the door. "Let me take a look."

He eased the door open and slipped out. Abbot closed the door after him. Jack counted the seconds. He got up to fifty-three when the door opened and Samuel, facing Abbot's drawn gun, told them the guards were gone on their rounds.

Cautiously, they retraced their steps to the main hallway, and from there back to the stairs and up to the floor above. The stairs did not continue to the prison floor.

"We'll have to take the main way up," Rosalind said as she and Samuel led them past kitchens, sanitation service, and medical facilities. "We can take care of up to fifty prisoners, though the most we've ever had is seventeen."

"Just as well," Samuel said. "Most of the people they get to work here are junkies, or stupid, or both."

"Looks like we're going right to the central elevators," Lewis said.

"We are," Rosalind said. "The stairs there are the only ones up to the top floor."

But the stairs were set right in the middle of a lounge area, and they were already halfway across the floor before they saw a staff member just waking up from an illicit nap on one of the couches.

When he saw them, he jumped up from the couch and started to run for a far door. Sarbin, with Abbot right behind him, hurried to catch him.

“It’s a raid,” the man shouted just as he reached the door. He fumbled with the knob, and Sarbin and Abbot caught him.

“Shut up, man,” Abbot hissed.

“Help!” the man yelled. Sarbin hit the man on the side of the head. The man staggered free of Abbot’s grasp, his feet slipped, and he came down hard, his head striking the edge of a low table near the door with a sickening crack.

“Shit!” Abbot said. “We’ve killed him.”

“That’s blown it,” Samuel said. “No way we can fake it

now. We had everything set up to look like someone had come down from Northampton and taken Velasquez away. ” “That wouldn’t have worked anyway,” Abbot said, “not after we raided their files.”

“All anybody would have noticed is that the paper supply is low. But now we’ve got a body.”

“We couldn’t just let him scream,” Sarbin protested. “No, but Rosalind and I are on duty tonight, and if we don’t come up with a good story, they’ll run us through that interrogation chamber. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“We’ll think of something,” Abbot said. “Right now, let’s go get Emily.”

They left the dead man where he lay, and took the central stairs up to the top floor of the building. The layout had been radically altered up here. Rosalind and Samuel had been up here, but never further than the central foyer. It took them a while to make sense of the corridor and room numbers. It took them a while longer to find their way past cryptically marked rooms, but at last they found themselves in front of the door bearing the number on Emily’s file.

Rosalind took out her packet of magnetic card keys, but they wouldn’t even fit in the slot. “I was afraid of this,” she said. “It’s a special lock.”

“Let me try,” Jenifer said. She took out a case from which she extracted three

thin rods. She put these into the slot, moved them around, pushed them in and out. Nothing happened.

“There’s got to be a set of keys in one of the offices downstairs,” Samuel said.

“And how long would it take to find it?” Jack asked.

“We’ve already spent too god damn much time in here.”

He cast an angry glance at Abbot. “With one dead man on the floor, there’s no sense in being subtle anymore.”

He knocked on the door. There was only silence. He knocked again, more loudly this time. Inside, he could hear Emily’s muffled answer.

“Emily,” he said, his mouth near the doorjamb. “This is Dr. Page. Are you all right?”

“Dr. Page? What are you doing here?”

“We’ve come to get you out. Now listen. Come up to the door.”

“Okay,” she said, and he could hear her more clearly now.

“Stand as far away from the door as you can,” he said, “but on this side of the room, got it?”

“I understand,” she said.

Jack stepped back. He took his right glove out of his jacket pocket and wrapped it around the muzzle of his gun.

“What are you going to do?” Abbot asked, suddenly anxious.

“Stand back, Abbot,” Jack snarled, “or I’ll hurt you.” Abbot stood back.

“Where’s the best spot?” Jack asked Rosalind. She pointed, a bit above the key slot. Jack put the muzzle of the gun against the door at that point, pressing the wrapped glove around it. He pulled the trigger. The sound was still loud, but the door, recoiling from the impact of the bullet, bucked slightly, the lock destroyed.

Jack pulled the door open and strode into a small, plainly furnished room. Emily, her long reddish brown hair stringy, her strong features strained, was standing in the corner, her hands over her mouth.

“Let’s get you out of here,” Jack said. Emily stared at him for a moment, and then with a whimper rushed to him.

He enfolded her in his arms, felt her muscles, tight and twitching. He’d fantasized about holding her, but at the moment the sensation was far from romantic.

“Come on,” he said, “pull yourself together.” She raised her head from her chest and looked past him at Rosalind and Abbot. “We’ve got to move real fast,” Jack went on, disengaging her from his arms. “Introductions later, escape first.”

They hurried out into the hall, where Abbot suddenly stopped, staring from side to side.

“Where’s Lewis?” he said. Jack felt a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“He was right with us,” Jenifer said.

“When?” Abbot snapped. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“I don’t know,” Jenifer said. “He was with us in the closet—”

“That was a hell of a long time ago,” Abbot said, looking accusingly at Jack. “All right, forget Lewis, let’s just get the hell out of here.”

“We’ll have to take the back stairs,” Samuel said as they hurried down the hall. “The ones in the central foyer are sealed off.”

As they entered the central foyer they found themselves face to face with four human guards, automatic pistols drawn. They were surrounded, their own weapons holstered. There was nothing to do but put up their hands. It was only then that Lewis came forward from his place of concealment beside the central bank of elevators.

Jack’s heart leaped, but what did the fool think he could do, unarmed against four guards.

“I’m sorry to do this to you, Jack,” Lewis said. The guards did not turn, they just grinned. “We’ve been friends,” Lewis went on, “but my conscience just won’t let you get away with this.”

“I can’t believe it,” Jack said, his surge of hope and admiration gone rotten in his stomach. “Why, Lewis?” “I made my choice long ago, Jack. Even when I was declared a traitor, and made an outcast, my faith never wavered. I knew that someday I’d be able to prove my loyalty, to win myself back into the good graces of my people. I’m just sorry that you had to be caught with the others.”

“You knew we were coming,” Abbot said.

“No, it was just an accident. This is the first time I’d ever been up here.”

“You were pretty convincing down there,” Jack said bitterly.

“I don’t like what’s happening up here, Jack. But I know where my loyalty lies, as you do. These other two, however,” he nodded at Rosalind and Samuel, “I don’t hold any sympathy for them at all.”

“I think we’d better secure these prisoners,” one of the guards said. He wiggled his gun at the disconsolate group. “Nice and easy now, take your guns out and drop them on the floor.”

Jack suppressed an urge to be foolishly heroic, and along with the others, did as he was told.

“You’re lying,” Abbot said to Lewis as one of the guards came forward to pick up the guns. “You knew about this all along. It’s just too pat.”

“No,” Lewis said, “though I suspected something when we got Annette. She didn’t name any names, Jack, not even yours, and I’d hoped that you were not involved.” “You’re the one who turned her in,” Rosalind said. “Yes I am,” Lewis admitted.

With the weapons collected, two of the other guards came forward, with alien handcuffs in their hands. “Turn around,” one of them ordered. “Put your hands behind your back.”

Rosalind jumped on him, scrabbling for the gun he held so carelessly in his left

hand. The other guards were taken completely by surprise, and for just a second, hesitated to shoot, fearful of hitting their companion.

But Abbot, fast as a released spring, knocked the guard nearest him aside, while Tom Sarbin plucked the gun out of that guard's hand and fired at Lewis.

The shot missed, the other guards scattered, Sally Greenstreet threw a running shoulder block at the one carrying their weapons and brought him crashing to the floor. Jack pushed Emily to one side and strode to where Rosalind and her guard were rolling on the floor. He reached down to club the guard on the side of the head with his false left hand, just as the guard's gun went off. Rosalind arched, her fingers convulsed on the guard's throat.

And then it was all over. Two guards were down, two were gone, and Lewis was nowhere in sight. Jack tried to pull Rosalind to her feet, but she was completely limp, and blood was pouring from a gaping wound in her chest.

He let her fall. "She's dead," he said.

"No," Samuel said, "she can't be." He knelt beside her, shook her shoulders. Rosalind's head just rolled around, bumping on the blood-stained carpet.

"Come on, Samuel," Sarbin said, "it's over."

"Shoot these suckers," Abbot muttered. He strode like an automaton over to the guard Sally had tackled to retrieve his gun.

"Enough," Jenifer said, grabbing his arm. "We've got to get out of here, now." She scooped up the rest of the weapons.

"Come away, Doug," Tom Sarbin said. "Don't blow everything on a little revenge." He kept Abbot's gun, and tugged him toward the central stairs.

Jack dropped his own gun back in his pocket and looked around for Emily. She was standing alone, sobbing hysterically. He went up to her, folded her in his arms, hugged her so hard she gasped.

"Come on," he said, letting her go but keeping his one good arm around her shoulders. "It's all over now," he said as he guided her after the others. She clung to him as they hurried down the stairs to the service floor.

His mind was in a turmoil. Lewis had betrayed him. Emily was safe. They were a long way from freedom yet.

They had to leave the central stairs at the service floor, and go back to the stairs by which they had come up— twenty minutes ago? They made it down to the administration floor, but there they ran into trouble. The two guards who had escaped had called in reinforcements, and it was only by virtue of the guards' bad marksmanship that they escaped being cut down as they tried to exit the stairwell.

"We can't get out this way," Abbot said.

"Back upstairs," Samuel told him. His voice was a strange mix of terrified panic and dead, flat grief. They retreated up the stairs, and when the guards tried to follow, sent a volley of lead at them.

Back at the service floor, Samuel led them at a run to the other side of the building. Abbot and Sally took up the rear, occasionally firing back at the guards in pursuit.

"Nobody uses this stair," Samuel said as they turned a last corner to see a steel door that looked as though it was painted shut. He grabbed the latch bar, threw his whole weight on it, the paint chipped and cracked, and the door opened.

They hurried down to the administration floor below. The stairwell was closed off by another new fire door. This one, however, did not open. Jenifer pushed Samuel aside, looked quickly at the lock mechanism, then flipped a little lever to one side. Above them, they could hear the guards pounding down in pursuit.

In one rush, they all went through the now unlocked door, and slammed it shut behind them. Moving as quickly as they could, they descended.

File Nineteen: Friday Morning

Jenifer started to leave the stairwell but Samuel stopped her. “They can shut down the elevator up there,” he said. “Besides, it’s too slow.”

“Then let’s move,” Abbot said, continuing down the stairs. The others followed.

Jack had to half carry Emily, and after two flights Tom Sarbin fell back to help him. There were no sounds of pursuit from above. The stairs seemed to go on forever, but at last they reached the ground floor.

“I’m coming with you,” Samuel said as they paused to catch their breath. “I can’t stay here, they’ll arrest me, or shoot me. I can’t go home, what can I do?”

“We’ll find you a place to hide out,” Jenifer said, “until this blows over. There’s an enclave of Naturals living out on west Howard. They’ll take care of you.”

“I had lots of friends in Northampton,” Samuel said. “They’re going to wonder what’s happened to me. They— they won’t wonder about Rosalind, though.”

“I’m sorry,” Abbot said. “We’ll try to get word to your friends. But we won’t tell them where you are. They might, like Lewis, find loyalty more important than friendship.” When their legs had stopped shaking from the long, rapid descent, and their breathing was more or less normal again, they left the building by the way they had come in. It was nearly four in the morning.

“We’d better split up,” Abbot said, “and try to get some rest.”

“You come with me,” Jenifer said to Samuel, and led him down the alley toward Holiday.

“I’ll take the documents,” Sarbin said, collecting the plastic bags. “We’ll start work on translating them later today. Where are you going to be?”

“I don’t know yet,” Abbot said, “we can’t go back to the house on Sanders, we left a body there, and we probably shouldn’t use the Pine Street apartment if we don’t have to. Sally, can you find us some place to hole up?”

“I’ve got several possibilities in mind,” she answered. “I’ll get to work on it.” Then she and Sarbin left, going up the alley toward Howe.

“What about Emily?” Jack asked. “I can take her to my hotel.”

“I wouldn’t chance it,” Abbot said. “Right now I think the best place for her would be her apartment. And I’d better come with you, just in case there’s some trouble.” They took Abbot’s car, leaving Jack’s at the K & K Cafe, so Jack could ride in back with Emily and continue to give her support and comfort. They went directly to Emily’s

apartment building, without any need, at this hour of the morning, to throw off followers.

“We should tell David Mallard about that setup,” Jack said to Abbot.

“Agreed, but it probably won’t do us any good.” “Why not? It’s such a blatant violation, the police and city government couldn’t possibly ignore it, no matter how corrupt they are.”

“Agreed, but I tell you, by the time anybody got around to investigating, all they’d find would be three empty floors. I’ll bet you they’re packing right now, and will be out of there before noon.”

Emily had calmed down by the time they got to her building and was able to walk to the elevator unassisted. But when they went into her apartment and she saw the mess left by Salanis, she started crying again. “What happened to this place?” she sobbed.

“The mob sent somebody over to try to find those photos you took of the Regency,” Jack said. “We can clean it up. I don’t think he did much real damage.”

“Wait here a minute,” Abbot told them while they were still just inside the living room. “I want to make sure there’s nobody here.” He took out his gun and went into the dining room and kitchen. Jack, ignoring Abbot’s instructions, led Emily to her couch and made her lie down. Abbot came back, then went to the bedrooms on the other side of the apartment.

Jack looked around the disheveled room, and saw whiskey bottles in an open

cabinet by the windows. He went over and poured a stiff shot of bourbon into a glass, and brought it to Emily.

“Drink this right down,” he told her. “It will make you relax, and maybe help you to get to sleep.”

She did as she was told. “Thank you,” she said, handing the glass back. “I guess it wasn’t my imagination after all. ” “It most certainly wasn’t. There is a conspiracy, at least between the mob and Northampton. We don’t know what it is yet, but we’re going to find out.” He took the folded photos out of his jacket pocket and showed them to her. “These are just copies,” he said. “I sent the originals to someone we can trust, and the rest of the pictures are at my hotel.”

“Do you know who they all are?”

“Most of them by now. Oswald, Kline, and that’s Dwight from Northampton.”

“Yes. And that man,” she pointed at Marty Patrushka, “was in the Delmark Building when I went there Monday night.”

“We know who he is,” Jack said. “These two are dead.” He indicated Rudy Salanis and Ryan Hadly. “And this one is another Visitor named Hickory. You stumbled onto something big, Emily, very big.”

Abbot came back, his gun no longer visible. “The place is clean,” he said. “I mean, there’s nobody here, the back door is locked, the fire exit is locked, we’ll be safe here for a while.”

Emily got up from the couch. Her color was better, and she seemed steady in spite of the quick, stiff drink. “Will you excuse me for a minute,” she said. “I’ll be right back. ” Then she went off toward the bathroom.

“Is there any more of that?” Abbot asked, pointing to Emily’s empty glass.

“In the cabinet behind you,” Jack said. “I don’t think Emily will mind if you help yourself.”

“Can I fix you one?” Abbot asked as he examined the bottles.

“Scotch, please, unblended if she has any.”

“It will have to be Dewars.” He poured two glasses half full and brought them over to Jack, who was now sitting at the end of the couch. They heard a toilet flush, and a moment later Emily came back.

“Do you feel up to telling us what happened?” Abbot asked her as she sat beside Jack.

“I think so. I couldn’t possibly go to sleep right now. But what do you want to know?”

“We’ll know that when we hear it,” Abbot said. “We’re hoping that you might have overheard something, or saw something that will help us figure out what this conspiracy is all about.”

“All right. Where shall I begin?”

“With the pictures,” Jack said. “When did you take them?”

“That was Saturday night. They’re going to tear the Regency down, you know. Nobody will ever build another place like that again. I wanted to record as much as possible while there was still a chance. Have you been inside?” Both men shook their heads.

“You should, if you can, it’s a wonderful place. The architect who designed it, Frank Hebson, incorporated lots of ideas that I can use, with a little updating. And I’m also collecting material for a book.” She turned to Jack. “You say you have the rest of the photos?”

“They’re safe. I’ll get them back to you or to Dahlgren just as soon as I can.”

“That’s good. I don’t know if I’d have the courage to go back to the Regency now. I mean, I had no idea anybody was there with me. I didn’t see anybody, I didn’t hear anybody—”

“Even when you took these pictures?” Abbot asked, pointing to the copies lying on the coffee table in front of the couch.

“No. I didn’t see anything when the flash went off, and it was so dark up there, I don’t see how those men could have seen each other’s faces.”

“You didn’t see the men in these photos when you developed the pictures?” Jack asked.

“No. By the time I got to the end of the roll, I was pretty tired, and just did it automatically. The first time I noticed anything was Sunday night, when I showed the pictures to Vanessa Carpentier, and discovered they were the wrong ones. I just glanced at them, didn’t really pay any attention.

I know now that I saw that photo there, where they’re looking at the camera, but I was so embarrassed at making a mistake that I just put it out of my mind.”

“But you dreamed about it,” Jack said.

“Yes, I did. It didn’t make much sense, just men staring at me. The image stayed with me all day Monday. I spent the whole day interviewing fabric designers, and I think I must have made some of them wonder about me, I was so distracted. By then I didn’t know whether I’d actually seen somebody in the box, or had just seen a picture like that somewhere, or if it was all just the dream. By the end of the day, I was getting frantic.” She looked at Abbot. “I have problems separating fantasy from reality,” she explained.

“It’s getting a little bit difficult for all of us these days,” Abbot said.

“I suppose so. God knows the world isn’t like it used to be. But I really do have a problem, and I’ve been working with Dr. Page for over a year on it, and I thought I was really making progress. So naturally, by the time I finished work Monday afternoon, I was beginning to get worried. It was like having a relapse.

“I probably would have called you anyway,” she said, turning to Jack, “but when I got home Monday evening, I saw a picture of Vincent Kline in the paper. I knew, then, that I had seen his face in one of the photos I’d taken at the Regency. And I remembered that Charles Anthony Oswald had also been in the picture. And I remembered Dwight, too, but I didn’t remember who he was, because I was used to seeing him on television in his uniform, and that night he was dressed like a human.

“But then I began to doubt myself. If those men really had been there, then there was something very wrong going on. On the other hand, maybe the whole thing was a delusion, and my seeing Kline in the paper had just supplied me with false memories. I couldn’t tell. But I knew, whichever way it was, I needed help. And

that's when I called Dr. Page."

"You had me worried," Jack said. "And then when you didn't show up, it was my turn to get frantic. What happened?"

"I went to my office to get the pictures. That was when I found the ones I was supposed to show Ms. Carpentier, and remembered that I'd taken the Regency pictures to her by mistake. And I'd forgotten to bring them back with me. I was really angry with myself. I drove over to the Delmark Building, and I had to park about a half a block away, across the street. If I could have parked in front, I would have gotten away.

"Anyway, I was just going into the Delmark lobby when I saw this man, Marty . . . ?"

"Patrushka," Jack said.

"Patrushka, coming from the elevators. He didn't see me at first, but I remembered him from the picture. And then when he did look up and saw me, he smiled, really nasty, and I knew I was in trouble. I ran back out of the building and across the street, and when I started back toward my car, I heard this Patrushka calling to somebody, and a squad car suddenly pulled over to the curb, and this guy, Hickory, got out, with a police captain. I couldn't believe it was happening. And Patrushka was running across the street toward me, too.

"I felt trapped. I turned around and ran into a Record Bar, but I couldn't find the back door, and when I asked the clerk, he looked at me like I was crazy, and then those men came in. The captain pretended it was police business. Hickory and Patrushka grabbed me and dragged me out to the squad car. Hickory said something to me, and I could hear that his voice was a Visitor's voice.

"I don't know what happened then, the next thing I remember was waking up strapped to a chair, with electronics and things—"

"You don't have to describe it," Abbot said. "We've seen it."

"Well, everything gets pretty vague after that. I was crazy by then, and I'm sure I was drugged. But they—they did things to me, and asked me questions, over and over again. Hickory questioned me. Dwight was there sometimes, and then he'd question me. He kept asking me about the pictures, why had I taken them,

where were they, other things I can't remember right now.

"I couldn't resist them. I had to tell them the truth, but I didn't know what it was anymore. I know I told them all kinds of things, different things every time. They'd say something like, you're working for the government, aren't you. And I'd think, yes, I was, of course, and I'd invent this elaborate story. But then they'd ask why I took the pictures, and I'd tell them about the book.

"After a while they gave up on me."

"That was probably the best thing that could have happened," Jack said. "If you hadn't been confused, if fantasy and reality were perfectly distinct to you, then they'd have found out all they wanted to know. As it is, they can't trust anything you told them."

"But you're not crazy now," Abbot said, "and we can learn a lot about what they're up to from the questions they asked you, from things they might have said to each other or to you. I know you're tired, we all are, but we may not have very much time. Even something that might seem trivial to you could be important."

"I'll try, what do you want to know?"

"Does the term 'extra low frequency radiation' mean anything to you?"

"No."

"They might have called it ELF," Jack said.

"Yes, I heard that several times; I don't remember who said it."

"What did they say about it?" Abbot asked. "What was the context?"

"I really don't remember. They weren't talking to me, and I'm afraid I really wasn't paying very close attention. But right after that they took me into a room and made me watch TV for a while. I couldn't figure it out. They put my head in a kind of vice, and I couldn't close my eyes or look away. They left me there for about an hour, and then came back and started asking questions, how did I feel about them, what did I think about Northampton, silly stuff like that."

“I think we’ve done enough for now,” Jack said to Abbot. “You realize it’s after five? We all need some sleep.”

“I guess you’re right,” Abbot said. “I wouldn’t recognize a clue if it came by. But I don’t want to leave Emily here alone, and there’s no place safe to take her until Sally calls. By now, the whole Northampton establishment will know Emily’s been sprung. It will be only a matter of time before they decide to look here.”

“One of you could sleep on the couch,” Emily said.

“I could sleep on the floor with no difficulty,” Jack said.

“All right,” Emily said. “I’ll let you take care of yourselves.” She got up and went unsteadily toward the bedroom. At the door, she stopped and turned around. “Thank you, Dr. Page,” she said, and then left them there.

“Pull off those cushions,” Abbot told Jack. He went to the front door as Jack did so, and made sure it was locked and bolted. Morning sunlight was coming in the curtained windows, but neither of them cared. Jack lay on the cushions, Abbot on the couch, and within moments both were asleep.

It seemed to Jack that he’d just closed his eyes when he felt someone gently shaking his shoulder. It was Emily.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Page, it’s silly, I know, but I just can’t stop thinking about that contract with Vanessa Carpentier. Do you have a sleeping pill?”

“What time is it?” Jack muttered.

“A little after seven. I’m sorry, I’m so tired, I just can’t go to sleep.”

“Have another drink,” Abbot said from the couch. “Have two. How can you worry about Carpentier when there’s something potentially much more important at

stake?”

“Please don’t be angry, Mr. Abbot. There’s nothing I’d like better than to sleep the clock around, but what can I do?”

The Carpentier job is the biggest thing that's ever come my way."

"There's nothing you can do about it now," Jack told her.

"I can call Marvin, talk with him about it, tell him what to do."

"At this hour?"

"Marvin's a morning person. I don't want to lose this contract."

"All right," Abbot said, "just be very careful what you say to him." ,

"I won't talk about anything but the job, I promise."

She went over to the phone by the door leading to the bedroom. Jack rolled over on his face, but he, too, was wide awake now. He sat up on the cushions and looked at Abbot, who was staring owlshly back at him.

"Coffee?" Jack asked.

"'Might as well."

They both went into the kitchen and while Jack tried to figure out how the coffee maker worked, Abbot got out eggs and bacon.

"I've been thinking about what we've learned so far," Abbot said, cracking eggs into a bowl. "I'm getting the idea that this conspiracy has something to do with deep propaganda and mind control."

"Still mind control?" Jack asked.

"Well, I could be wrong, but look at it. ELF has to do with brain waves. Dwight is the number two man in Northampton's department of Human-Visitor relations. He's also been involved with setting up a TV station in Northampton, and what's that silly thing about forcing Emily to watch *Gandhi* on TV?"

"I see the connection," Jack said, "sort of, but it seems like you're kind of reaching. How do Kline and Oswald fit into this theory of yours?"

"I don't know, maybe I'm just suffering from lack of sleep. But I'm sure we could learn a lot from Emily, if we can just get her to remember what people said

to her, and said in her presence.”

“I’ll do better,” Emily said from the doorway, “after a good night’s sleep. But Mr. Abbot, how can you trust anything I tell you, any more than the Visitors did? I *think* my thinking is straight now, but it certainly wasn’t then, and all my memories of that time are rather fuzzy.”

“We have one advantage,” Jack said. “I’m your therapist, I know you pretty well, and I know how your thought patterns work. I should be able to tell whether you’re on the right track or not. Too, you won’t be under the same kind of stress with us as you were back there. And besides, we’ll give you all the information you need to help you remember. We’ll learn a lot, Emily, don’t worry about that.”

“Do you want to talk about it now?” she asked.

“No, we’re all too tired. At least we’re going to have a good breakfast.”

“What about Dahlgren?” Abbot asked as Emily got out plates and forks.

“He’s coming right over,” she said. “All I told him was that I was back, but that he’d have to be the one to work with Ms. Carpentier.”

“That’s good,” Abbot said. “If he needs to know anything more, we can tell him when he gets here.” “I’m remembering something,” Emily said as they ate. “I don’t know if it means anything, but one time when Dwight and Hickory were talking, they said something about subliminal messages.”

“In what context?” Abbot asked.

“I’m not sure, but it had something to do with TV, I think.”

“You know,” Abbot said, “TV keeps cropping up. Hickory worked with Carpentier, setting up that TV station in Northampton. And they made Emily watch a TV show for no apparent reason.”

“Unless it was to test the effectivity of some kind of subliminal conditioning,” Jack said. “Did you notice anything at all like that?” he asked Emily.

“Not that I can remember.”

“I wonder if Carpentier could tell us anything,” Abbot said.

“Possibly,” Jack said, “David Mallard said they did a full investigation and found nothing at all out of the ordinary—aside from the fact of the job itself.”

“There’s another word,” Emily said. “‘Psychoneurological.’ Does that mean anything to you?”

“It could mean all kinds of things,” Jack said.

“Dwight also said something about people being more ‘cooperative’ with the Visitors, and ‘agreeable to their plans.’ ”

“That doesn’t make any sense to me,” Abbot said.

“Wishful thinking on their part,” Jack suggested, just as the doorbell rang.

Emily went to answer, with Jack and Abbot standing just out of sight of the door, guns drawn.

“Hello, Marvin,” Emily said. “Thanks for coming over.”

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Dahlgren asked as he came into the living room. He stopped short when he saw Jack and Abbot, both putting away their guns.

“You know Dr. Page,” Emily said. “This is Douglas

Abbot. Dr. Page and Mr. Abbot got me out of a lot of trouble, but—I’ll have to let them tell you about that.” “Is that why you called me over?” Dahlgren asked. “No, I really do want to talk about the Carpentier job.” “I called her last night,” Dahlgren said, looking suspiciously from Jack to Abbot. “She’s willing to sign the contract, if I can produce the same kind of job you proposed to her. ”

“That should be no problem,” Emily said. “I’m going to have to stay in hiding for a while, but I can work with you all you want.”

“What do you have to hide for?”

“There’s some very bad business going down,” Abbot said, “and the people

involved think that Emily knows more about it than she does. They were holding her in a secret prison up until about three o'clock this morning, and they're very likely to come looking for her again. In just a couple of hours we're going to a safe house. If she just lays low for a while, her part in this won't be important to them any more, and they'll let her be."

"Who's 'them'?"

"Northampton and the mob."

"Jesus!"

"Emily?" Jack said. "Are you all right?" Her face had suddenly gone absolutely white.

"Dr. Page, I feel awful."

"I think you need a doctor."

"Probably just exhaustion," Abbot said. "I'm feeling pretty rocky myself."

"Rocky's not the word for it," Dahlgren said angrily, leading a very shaky Emily over to lie down on the couch. "Her hands are ice cold and she's dripping with sweat. Dr. Page, can you do something?"

"I'm a psychologist, not a physician," Jack said. "But I know someone who's good."

"Let me," Abbot said, going to the phone. "We've got too many outsiders involved in this already. I want someone I can trust, someone who's already a part of our network." He dialed a number.

"Let me get you a blanket," Dahlgren said to Emily, and went back to the bedroom as if he knew his way around. He probably did, Jack thought with a twinge of jealousy.

Dahlgren came back after a moment with two heavy wool blankets and a pillow. He wrapped Emily up, made her comfortable, then turned to Jack.

"It seems obvious to me," he said, "that this is serious trouble, and I don't want

any part of it. If I thought you could take care of Emily, I'd just go home now, but I think you're going to be too busy to do that. Emily's sick, and I'll do what I can for her until she gets better. You and Abbot can check me out any way you want."

"We will," Abbot said, putting down the phone.

"I've got to call the office," Dahlgren said. "I want to tell Joyce that I'll be out for the day and not to worry about me, make some arrangements so I can start work as soon as Emily is up to it." He looked squarely at Abbot. "You want to listen in?"

"Make your call," Abbot said. He looked too tired to care. But Jack noticed that he did in fact listen as Dahlgren made vague explanations and reassurances.

Dahlgren was still on the phone when the doorbell rang again. Abbot was listening to Dahlgren, and Emily had dropped off to sleep, so Jack went to answer it.

It was Dr. Betty Jobs. "Dr. Page?" she said, "do I have the right apartment?"

"I don't know, who are you looking for?"

"It's all right," Abbot said, coming to the door. "Come on in," he said to Dr. Jobs.

"Where's our patient, Douglas?" Dr. Jobs asked, then saw Emily on the couch. She went over and knelt beside her, touching her pale damp face and hand. "Let's get her into the bedroom," she said, rising to her feet.

"I'll help," Dahlgren said. Between them they*got Emily up off the couch and half carried her out of the living room. Dahlgren came back almost at once.

The three men waited, uncomfortable in each other's presence. Abbot threw himself down on the couch and put his arm over his eyes. Dahlgren paced back and forth. Jack, sitting in an easy chair, wanted more than anything to take off his artificial arm so he could ease the places on his shoulder and back where the straps pressed into him.

Dr. Jobs was not gone very long. "She's going to be all right," she said when she

came back. “She’s suffering from exhaustion, both physical and nervous, and I’ve given her some medication that should help. She should be kept quiet for a couple days.” She looked from Jack to Abbot. “You don’t look too well yourself,” she said. “What happened?” Abbot and Jack told her about it briefly. Dr. Jobs listened with complete sympathy, Dahlgren with growing dismay.

“I’ve got more trouble for you,” Dr. Jobs said when they’d finished. “Word came down the grapevine that somebody searched your house last night, Dr. Page. We don’t know who it was, but it wasn’t the police, so it had to be the mob.”

“How did you find out about that?” Jack asked.

“Tom Sarbin told me. He stopped by for something to keep him awake. One of the people who are translating those documents you got from the prison had just gotten word from a friend on the police force that there was a warrant out for your arrest. The charge is the murder of one Ryan Hadly. The reason our friendly police officer passed the word along was because the warrant was issued before the police went to your house just a couple hours ago to find the body. The house had already been searched by the time the police got there, and we figure that somebody in the department knew that Hadly was going to be there last night, and had the papers all made out ahead of time. Just in case you were thinking of going home, Dr. Page.” “Believe me, I wasn’t. I killed Hadly, all right, he’d broken in and had a gun.”

“There was no gun found on the body.”

“He fired two shots into the floor. Anyway, I’m staying at a hotel, or at least I’ve got a room there.”

“Good enough. You’re being set up for a frame, Dr. Page. And from the way I hear it, the police are actively in on it.”

“Emily said that a police lieutenant was one of the three men who kidnapped her Monday night.”

“So we not only have the mob,” Abbot said, “working with the Visitors in Northampton, we also have the police, and God knows who in the city government, also involved in this conspiracy.”

“That’s just too many sides to make any sense,” Dr. Jobs said.

“I know that,” Abbot said. “And it’s driving me crazy.” “Do you need anything?” Dr. Jobs asked Abbot. “What I need is sleep. We’ll get that as soon as Sally gets us our safe house—”

The phone rang. Jack started to go to it.

“No,” Abbot said. “Let Dahlgren answer it. If it’s someone for Emily, they’ll understand his being here, I think.”

Dahlgren picked up the phone and listened for a moment. “It’s for you, Dr. Jobs,” he said.

“I told people where I could be reached,” Dr. Jobs explained as she took the phone. “This is Dr. Jobs,” she said, then listened as the person on the other end talked. She didn’t speak again, and when she hung up, her face was grim.

“That was Orson Strangways,” she told Abbot. “Sarbin asked him to hang around the police station, to see what he could find out. I don’t know how they did it, but somebody tipped off the police that Dr. Page is here, in this apartment, and they’re on their way right now.”

Abbot was staring at Dahlgren. “You know anything about that?” he asked.

“Swear to God, Abbot, I’m on your side.”

“I’ve got to go,” Dr. Jobs said. “And you had better, too. And quickly.”

File Twenty: Friday Afternoon

Jack was sound asleep on the couch when the sound of a closing door woke him. It was Marvin Dahlgren, with a bag of groceries.

They were in a house on Berry Avenue, toward the south edge of town. As soon as they had gotten safely away from Emily's apartment building, Abbot had stopped at a phone booth and called his network. Sally had just then been trying to reach them, but had hung up when an unfamiliar male voice had answered Emily's phone. She'd gotten the house, gave them the address, and Abbot had driven them directly there.

Dahlgren put the bag of groceries down on a coffee table and took out the folder of Regency photos, which he handed to Jack. "And here's your car keys," he added, fishing for them in his slacks pocket. "And your money." He handed Jack the keys and live hundred dollars in twenties.

"I appreciate it, Marvin. What time is it?"

"Twenty after twelve. Want some lunch?"

"I sure do, but what took you so long?"

"I made a little side trip," Dahlgren said, carrying the groceries through the dining room into the kitchen, with Jack following. "After I cashed the check and got your car, I drove by your house. I thought I might be able to stop in and pick up some things for you, but the police were there." "That was pretty risky, wasn't it," Jack started to say when the phone rang. But before he could answer it, he heard Abbot pick up a bedroom extension.

"I was careful. I had a story already worked out. I just rang the bell, as if I were visiting, and this plainclothesman answered the door and brought me inside before I had a chance to ask for you. Whoever searched your house was a lot less considerate than they were at Emily's place." "So what happened then?"

"They questioned me for about an hour. One of them was a Lieutenant, LeGrange was his name, but he wore a uniform, really proud of it. They wanted

to know who I was, and where you were, of course. I told them I had come on a recommendation to see if you would take me on as a patient.”

“Did they buy it?”

“Sure. I just talked like Emily used to before she started seeing you. I kept it subtle, and I think that’s what convinced them. If I’d come on like a TV lunatic, they would have caught on in an instant. After an hour LeGrange looked around at the other cops and just gave up. He told me to find some other doctor.”

“Sounds like you did good,” Jack said with a grin.

“I think I did but I didn’t take any chances. After I left your place I went to the library, checked out a couple books on schizophrenia, then went to the grocery store and spent a lot of time shopping. Didn’t leave until the tail decided I was really innocent, and then I went home, changed clothes, and came over here.”

“You don’t fool around, do you? That Lt. LeGrange was the one who gave me the runaround when I called about Emily on Tuesday. And Emily told us that a uniformed lieutenant was one of the three men who grabbed her.”

“Is that right? Damn, I wish I’d known that. On the other hand, maybe it was better I didn’t. I would have kicked his balls.”

“Where’d the groceries come from?” Abbot asked, coming into the kitchen.

“I just bought them,” Dahlgren said, laying out the makings for lunch—coldcuts mostly.

“You left the house?”

“I got Jack’s car, cashed a check, had a nice talk with the police.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? You bring the cops in here I’ll give you to them.”

“Look, Abbot, you were zonked out, Emily is sedated, Jack was dead on his feet, things needed to get done. So I did them.”

“Yeah. And what the hell did you tell the police?”

“That I was a sick man in need of psychological counseling.”

“He went to my house,” Jack explained.

“Dahlgren, you’re insane!” Abbot shouted.

“I don’t think so,” Jack said, perversely enjoying Abbot’s discomfiture. “But don’t shout, Emily’s trying to sleep.”

“Listen, Jack, this could be serious.”

“Keep your pants on,” Dahlgren said. “I knew what I was doing.”

“Like hell you did.”

“Look, Abbot, you know how I made my way through college? I sold grass. I don’t know how many kilos of it I moved, but it was a lot. Supplied the whole school, and the other one in town too. You learn a lot of tricks when you’re a big time dealer.”

“You blow a lot now, huh?”

“Haven’t touched it since I graduated. How ‘bout some lunch?”

“Sounds good to me,” Jack said. “Let me fix it, Marvin. You fill Abbot in on what you did this morning.”

So while Jack made up huge sandwiches with plenty of salami, cheese, mustard, and onions, Dahlgren elaborated on his morning’s activities. By the time he finished, Abbot was considerably mollified.

“I’m sorry, Dahlgren,” he said. “You did a good job after all. That was Jenifer on the phone,” he said to Jack. “What Dahlgren says here ties in with what Dr. Jobs told us, and with what Jenifer has heard from our underground sources.

“As far as I can figure, the police are working under pressure from certain lawyers, some of whom are just mouthpieces for the mob, but some others are associates of Oswald’s. It would take influence like that to keep a lieutenant on a stakeout instead of just leaving it to the ranks.”

“Oswald’s connection doesn’t make the picture any clearer,” Jack said. “I still don’t see where he fits in.”

“I don’t either,” Abbot admitted. “But we’re getting little hints. They wouldn’t make any sense at all if we didn’t know about Oswald meeting Kline and Dwight that night at the Regency. This is a lot bigger puzzle than we had thought, but some of the pieces are beginning to fall into place. One thing for sure, if Oswald were just a victim, he wouldn’t be using his influence this way. He’s a part of the cover-up.”

“Somebody’s got to fill me in on all the rest of this story,” Dahlgren said as Emily walked into the kitchen.

“I hope these walls are soundproof,” she said, taking one of the sandwiches. “I can hear you clear at the other end of the house.”

“How are you feeling?” Dahlgren asked her.

“Almost like new,” she said, smiling up at him in a way that made Jack despair. “Dr. Jobs knows her business.” “She does that,” Abbot said. He handed a sandwich to Dahlgren, and took the last one for himself. Jack had to make another. “Do you think you can tell us some more about what happened while you were being interrogated?” “I think so,” Emily said. “My head is clear for the first time since Sunday night, though my memory is still fuzzy. I hate to think about that time, but if it will be of any help. ...”

“It will be,” Jack said.

“All right,” Abbot said as they took their sandwiches into the dining room. “We’re getting the idea that TV is mixed up in this somehow. Can you tell us anything about that?”

“Well, they made me watch that movie.”

“Let’s try something else,” Jack said. “Emily, did you know that Vanessa Carpentier once worked for Dwight, helping him build a TV station up in Northampton?” “Ye-es, she did mention something about that in passing. She seemed ashamed of it.”

“What can you tell us about that?” Jack encouraged, in his best professional

voice.

“Gee, not much. She was paid well, she said. It was an easy job.”

“Where was this station?” Abbot asked.

“In Northampton. In a shopping mall I think.”

“There are five or six malls up there,” Abbot said. “Did she mention which one?”

“No. I haven’t been to Northampton since the Visitors came. I’m not sure I remember where all the malls are.” “I can ask her,” Dahlgren said. “I have an appointment with her later today.”

“She doesn’t like to talk about it,” Jack told him.

“I can be subtle. We’ve got a lot of consultation to do. She thinks I’m taking on the job all by myself, she doesn’t know Emily’s going to be coaching me. So I’ve got to sell myself to her, and that means lots of talking about other things besides the redecorating.” He turned to Emily. “That’s going to be a fantastic job,” he said. “We might be able to move to New York on the strength of it.”

“I guess,” Abbot said, “I don’t have to tell you about discretion.”

“Discretion is one thing,” Dahlgren told him, “that I know everything about. You understand?”

Emily looked confused, as if she knew nothing about Dahlgren’s dope-dealing past, but Abbot just clenched his mouth and nodded.

“It was on the second floor,” Emily said suddenly. “What was?” Dahlgren asked.

“The studio. It was in a mall, but it was on the second floor.” She looked up at them. “Does that help?”

“It sure does, sweetheart,” Abbot said. “There’s only one two-story mall in Northampton, the Fairfield at the north edge of town.”

“You think we ought to go check it out?” Jack asked. “Are you kidding? We’re

going right now.”

“What about Emily?” Dahlgren asked.

“Can you stay here with her for a little while?” Abbot asked. “I’ll get somebody to come over, and then you can go have your meeting with Ms. Carpentier.”

“That’s not until three,” Dahlgren said.

“Then we’re on our way,” Abbot answered.

File Twenty-one: Friday Afternoon

They took Abbot's car, just in case the police were on the lookout for Jack's, and drove north up Wade Avenue. It joined with US 81, which they took through the center of the town to where the bridge spanned the bay, first to Rigley Island, and from there to Northampton on the north shore.

Rigley Island was a neutral zone. Before the Visitors came, it had been used primarily as a marina for the Yacht Club, and a base for small fishing boats that plied the Atlantic coast. Now it was abandoned, except for two guard posts.

The post on the Freeport side was manned by human soldiers from up north. When Abbot stopped at the barricade, the corporal on duty just asked their names, then waved them on. "Just checking the sound of our voices,"

Abbot said. "It's traffic going the other way that they're really interested in."

The Visitor post, on the other side of the island, was different. Here the red-uniformed Visitor guards stopped the car and made them get out while it was searched. Then they asked for identification, and before Jack, suddenly panic-struck, could reach for his wallet, Abbot handed the Visitor in charge two driver's licenses.

"What's your business in Northampton, Mr. Kennedy?" the Visitor asked, still holding the licenses.

"Television electronics," Abbot said, "cameras, control boards, and like that. I understand that you recently installed a TV station and studio up here, and—"

"How did you find out about that?"

"Hell, it's common knowledge. WCTY helped build it. A market's a market."

"Mr. Schoenfeld?" the Visitor said, looking at Jack. "What's your business here?"

"Learning the ropes," Jack said, off the top of his head. "What ropes?"

“Selling television electronics. I'm new to the business, and Mr. Kennedy is showing me how it's done.”

“All right,” the guard said, handing back the license. Abbot handed one to Jack, and sure enough, it had his picture but was made out in the name of Jon Schoenfeld.

They got back in the car and started across the second bridge. “What do you know about TV equipment?” Jack asked.

“That's how I made my living, before the Visitors came.”

“I won't ask you about the license,” Jack said, putting it back in his wallet in front of his real one. “What I'm curious about right now is how Northampton Visitors get back and forth to Freeport. They'd be spotted by our guardpost as soon as they had to give their names.” “They obviously don't go that way,” Abbot said. “There's another bridge about fifteen miles upriver. And another one twenty-three miles west of that. I'd guess that they cross over at that bridge, and then come east to Freeport on US 47.”

Northampton, like Freeport, was industrial, right on the bay. Northampton was a smaller city, only about 150,000 people, according to the last census, and not counting Visitors. At US 18, the industrial section was only a block deep, and then they were in the heart of the high-rise commercial district.

The city was a strange contradiction. There were cars in the street, pedestrians on the sidewalks, but there was far less traffic than there was in Freeport. The city was clean, but as they drove north on US 81 they could see, up the side streets, that many buildings were in disrepair, the roads potholed.

“There's practically no crime here, you know,” Abbot said.

“At least reported crime.”

“No, any crime at all. It's like Vlad Tepes's time, people don't dare commit crimes or they'll be impaled. Not literally, but it comes to the same thing.”

“You used to hear people talking about law and order. Well, there's a terrible price to pay to achieve it.”

“I agree,” Abbot said. “Of course, Freeport is a bit extreme in the other direction, and we’re beginning to discover why. But I’ve heard people in Freeport talk about the lack of crime up here, in a very envious way. And I don’t like it. Too many of them seem to be willing to trade their freedom for it. And it didn’t used to be like that.”

They turned left up Holburn, right in the middle of downtown. Holburn was the main road west, and paralleled the river which fed the bay. Five blocks later and they were into a built-up residential area, where they turned right onto Kingsley. Jack, like Emily, had not been here in over three years.

Kingsley was a main thoroughfare north. As they drove along, Jack realized that he’d seen no hookers, no dope dealers, no vagrants so far. Those twilight-world people were such a regular part of Freeport, had been since—since the Visitors had come, he realized—that he almost took them for granted now.

They were stopped when they came to the intersection with O’Banion. Big, white, armored Visitor vehicles stood at the curb, and armed, red-uniformed guards questioned them. Abbot told the same story, showed the same licenses. But this time the guards called in the license numbers to some central office.

Jack sweated. But at last the licenses were handed back and they were told to go on their way. As they drove off, Abbot flashed Jack a big grin. “We do the job right,” he said.

The Fairfield Mall was at the northern edge of the city, on the corner of Kingsley and Fairfield. Beyond were only second growth forests and abandoned farms.

Though it was early afternoon, a prime shopping time, the parking lot was half empty. They were able to find a space right near the main entrance.

Just inside was a directory showing a plan of both floors keyed to a list of the businesses. Half the entries were blank. “Northampton Visitor TV,” however, was plainly marked, and on the second floor.

The mall was eerie. The shoppers—half as many as Jack would have expected in Freeport—moved with a lack of enthusiasm that was painfully obvious. Jack and Abbot went to the central escalators and up to the second floor, noting all the shops with white paper pasted to the inside of their windows. Clothing stores, shoe stores, even a drug store were still in business. But there were no toy stores,

office supplies, video centers.

Two uniformed Visitors stood at the top of the escalator, casually watching the shoppers. Jack and Abbot feigned the studied indifference of the other shoppers as they went up. The guards glanced at them, but nothing more.

The studio entrance was halfway from the escalator to the Belk's store at the end of the mall. Several adjacent shops had been incorporated into the operation, their display windows now filled in with wood or plastic. A discreet sign over the door bore both alien and English words, in English it read "Northampton Public Service Television."

The large room beyond the door looked just like an insurance office. There were five or six desks, stacked high with papers, with men and women working at each. A central desk had an intercom panel and several phones. With Jack staying just a little behind, Abbot walked up to the woman seated there.

"Hi," he said, "I'm Tim Kennedy from Freeport. Am I correct in assuming that this is the studio that was recently built with the help of WCTY-TV?"

"Yes, sir," the woman said. She was polite, but not enthusiastic.

"It's not been easy to find you," Abbot went on. "My firm specializes in TV studio equipment. We service WCTY in Freeport, and other local stations further north. I'd heard through our industrial grapevine that you were new here, and I thought I'd come by to see if I could be of any service, to you."

"You'll want to talk to Debra Walston," the receptionist said. "Will you wait just a moment please?" She touched a button on her intercom panel, and spoke softly into it. It was secondhand equipment. "Miss Walston will be with you shortly," the receptionist said.

There were no chairs for visitors, so Jack and Abbot stood, a few feet from the desk, waiting. After a moment a very small black woman dressed in a casual business suit came over to the desk. She was energetic, in her thirties, with a light complexion. "Mr. Kennedy?" she said, looking at Abbot.

"Miss Walston. This is my associate, Mr. Schoenfeld." He went on into his spiel again, this time with more detail. "It seemed to me," he finished, "that a studio here in Northampton might have difficulty in finding reliable suppliers of TV

equipment, and I thought I'd take this opportunity of making your acquaintance, hopefully to our mutual benefit."

"It hasn't been easy," Miss Walston agreed. "Of course, we're strictly a local station, and have little need for state-of-the-art equipment."

"I understand. And, you have been in operation now for only a very short time. But I would like to become familiar with your facility, and make known to you the kind of equipment we can make available to you. In six months or a year, when you have shaken down, and have a better idea of your needs, I'd like to be the first person you'll think of." "I'll be happy to show you around," Walston said. They followed her from the reception area into a hallway, and from there into a small studio. Jack was interested, as he had never been behind the scenes in a TV station before, but while Abbot and Walston talked shop, discussed various equipment, and chatted about TV in general, he directed his attention instead to the layout of the place, watched the other staff and crew, noted the locations of doors, and read the signs on them.

They went from that studio to a larger one that could seat an audience of about a hundred, and from there to a processing lab, a sound stage, and to other rooms and labs the function of which Jack just barely comprehended. In his mind he was constructing a map, orienting it within the mall, and gauging the other people present. Most of these people were human. The uniformed Visitors seemed mostly to be supervisory.

During the next half hour or so, Abbot kept up a continuing conversation about the equipment he saw, suggesting new models, praising a classic old device or two, condemning others. It sounded, to Jack, like a careful preparation for later sales. If Jack had been in Walston's place, he would certainly have called on Abbot again.

"You're making me wish," Walston said at one point, "that I had something of a freer hand. It's been a struggle making do with this old equipment, and the problem hasn't always been money. Sometimes it's simply because what we want isn't available. But you have to understand that we really are quite a small station here. I'm very interested in almost everything you've told me about, but we couldn't find a use for most of it."

"That would be true of any studio," Abbot told her.

“Perhaps, but more so with us. This studio, Mr. Kennedy, has special limitations. We could broadcast to a wider area, but instead we serve only Northampton. People in south Freeport, for example, probably can’t even pick us up. And all our programming is aimed at the non-administrative Visitor workforce. Our station serves purely as a supplement to the other stations we get here. You might almost call us a private channel.”

“It would seem, then,” Abbot said, “that what you really want to do is provide a cable service instead of a broadcast medium. This would free you of certain government regulations and restrictions that are in force, even this far south. With cable—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Kennedy, that just isn’t possible. The cost of cable is far too high, and there are too few ‘customers’ to warrant the expense. As for government restrictions, since we have such a limited broadcast range, we have no difficulty with any interspecies regulations that might apply to us.”

“Even with Freeport so nearby?” Abbot asked. “You must, at least, reach the entire bay-side part of the city.” “Channel adapters, Mr. Kennedy. Some of the programming is not for human consumption. I can’t tell you what it is because I don’t know.”

“I see,” Abbot said with a sigh. It seemed to Jack that he was truly disappointed. “And yet, quite a number of humans work here.”

“Most of us are human,” Walston said. “Of course, all our executives are Visitors, at least those with any policy responsibilities. I’m about the highest placed human in the station.”

“But you’re still a very new station,” Abbot said. “What possibility is there of your increasing your coverage or operations?”

“That’s not something that I would have any say in. All decisions of that sort are made by somebody else.”

“I see,” Abbot said. “Would it be possible,” Abbot went on, “for me to speak with the station director?”

“Why, yes, it would, but unfortunately Dwight left the studio suddenly late yesterday afternoon and hasn’t yet returned.”

“Do you have any idea when he will be back?” Abbot asked.

“He should be here right now,” Walston said, “but he left no word where he could be reached. It’s most irregular. If you like, I can introduce you to our assistant director.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Abbot said.

This was what the whole ploy had been building up to, Jack realized. Dwight’s mysterious absence was a setback, but maybe this assistant would do just as well. He paid special attention to where they were going.

But he was not prepared, when they were shown into a small but well-furnished executive office, to see Hickory seated behind the large, electronics-filled desk. The Visitor, in his red and black officer’s uniform, greeted them calmly, and listened with polite interest as Debra Walston explained who Jack and Abbot were and why they had come here.

“Won’t you sit down, gentlemen,” Hickory invited when Walston left. Jack and Abbot took comfortable chairs in front of the desk. Hickory sat back, folded his hands across his belt buckle, and stared at Jack.

“How have you been doing, Dr. Page?” Hickory asked. Jack couldn’t answer, indeed, he couldn’t even breathe.

“I guess,” Abbot said slowly, “there’s no use in carrying on with this charade.”

“None at all, Mr. Abbot. Well, you’ve seen our operation here, what do you think?”

“That it’s a very expensive cover-up. I’m sure you do exactly what I’ve been lead to believe you do. I’m also sure that that hardly matters to you, except as it conceals something else.”

“You are free to believe what you wish,” Hickory said.

“What about the Regency Theater?” Abbot asked.

Hickory smiled. “The facts,” he said, “of our interest in the Regency are a matter of public record.”

“Even your most recent visit?” Abbot started to say when the door behind them opened and two guards came into the room, guns drawn.

Abbot’s response, as usual, was instantaneous. In one fluid movement, remarkable in a person as solidly built as he, he was out of his chair, turned around, down on his knee with the chair as a cover. His gun was out and the shot came even as he dropped into place. The guard nearest him kicked backward and went down.

The other guard, aiming at Jack, didn’t shoot for fear of hitting Hickory, immediately behind him. Too bad, Jack thought, as he pulled his own gun, fired, and watched the guard fall.

Alarm bells started going off. Jack turned back to Hickory just in time to see him slipping through a door panel behind his desk. Abbot’s gun cracked, the panel dimpled, and the bullet ricocheted into the ceiling.

“Let’s get out of here,” Abbot said. He and Jack stepped over the bodies of the two guards and left the office. Out in the corridor, people were standing frozen in alarm, staring at them.

“This way,” Jack said, turning to the left even as more guards appeared at the other end of the corridor to their right. Jack and Abbot got off two quick shots each, but didn’t pause to see their effect. They sprinted past the now panicked civilians, to a double door near the end of the hall.

“Back way,” Jack said as they went through. Laser blasts crackled behind them. They were in what looked like a mail room, with a door at the far side. As they reached it, Abbot turned and fired three times. Jack, looking over his shoulder as he opened the door, saw two guards fall and others ducking back out of range. Then they were through.

They were in another hallway, at the far end of which Jack could see the receptionist at her desk, staring at him with horrified eyes. Doors on either side of the hallway were open, people looking out in alarm. They ducked back in as Jack and Abbot ran toward the front.

There were shouts, now, as well as alarm bells. People ran through the reception area and, even as Jack and Abbot emerged from the hallway, more guards came from across the way. Abbot stopped dead and fired three times, methodically.

Jack just squeezed the trigger. Then they both broke and dashed out the door into the mall.

The people on the mezzanine, while aroused by the alarms and shots, were going about their business, with no idea what was happening. Jack dropped his gun into his pocket, while Abbot put in a fresh clip.

“Just walk,” Abbot said, holstering his gun, They went toward the escalators, trying to pretend they had nothing to run from.

The escalator guards were coming toward them. Jack looked over his shoulder and saw other red uniforms coming from the Belk’s store. Beyond the escalators were other guards. Only the presence of human shoppers kept them from firing.

The guards emerging from the TV studio were not so fastidious. Heedless of the danger to the bystanders, they shot, and Jack felt the scorch of a near miss. He grabbed Abbot’s shoulder and turned him toward a County Seat jeans store, just a few paces away.

They ran past frightened customers, knocking over racks of jeans, shirts, jackets, toward the back of the store.

Behind them, Visitor guards opened fire, and screams told of innocent bystanders being hit. Jack and Abbot slammed through a doorway into a stock room, where Abbot stopped, turned, and squeezed off three careful shots. Jack, meanwhile, pushed aside an off-duty clerk, looking for the service exit.

“This way,” he shouted over his shoulder when he found it. He lunged against the latch bar and pushed through, Abbot right on his heels.

They were on the second level parking deck, but on the wrong side of the mall. The stairs to the lower level were a long way off, and the ramp down even farther. Jack and Abbot turned toward the Belk’s end of the building and started running.

They made it halfway around the end of the mall before guards started emerging from service exits. Jack was barely able to avoid being shot down by ducking behind a parked car. Abbot, a few cars behind him, was running at a crouch toward another set of stairs.

Jack, too, kept low as he ran, between cars, changing aisles, heading in a wild, zig-zag course toward the stairs, once rolling under a truck. The red-uniformed guards were quick in pursuit, shooting for effect. More than one car exploded as its gas tank was struck.

Jack made the stairs just a step or two behind Abbot, who ran halfway down to the landing, then jumped over the rail to the stairs below. Jack, unable to master that feat with his false arm, just skimmed the edges of the concrete stair treads as he descended, moving so fast that he crashed into the rail at the landing. He pushed himself off and down the rest of the stairs even as Visitor guards appeared at the top. Halfway down he turned and fired through the gaps in the treads, hitting one guard who knocked another down as he fell.

Jack leaped to the bottom of the stairs. Where was Abbot? More important, where was the car? He got the answer to both at once as Abbot, behind the wheel, brought the car screeching through the parking lot toward him. Jack gauged the car's arrival, turned back to the stair and fired at the descending guards until his gun was empty. Abbot braked beside him, Jack tumbled into the back seat, and Abbot gunned the motor, racing between the rows toward the parking lot exit.

Jack forced his hand to be steady as he reloaded his gun. Muscle spasms in his back and shoulder made his left arm twitch in unexpected directions. Abbot turned a sharp corner, making the car rise up on two wheels before it crashed back to the pavement. The shock made Jack look up to see two white Visitor vehicles blocking the Kingsley Street exit—Abbot had swerved to avoid them at just the last minute.

At the far west end of the lot was another exit, and Abbot made it just ahead of the pursuing Visitor vehicles. He raced across Fairfield, causing cars traveling in both directions to brake wildly and honk their horns. The resulting confusion bought them a little time.

They raced south to O'Banion, where Abbot turned right with a squeal of tires, nearly sideswiping the cross traffic. A block later he turned left, then right again before slowing to a more reasonable pace. Another left and a right, and they were headed west through a residential district of single family dwellings, the houses unpainted, the lawns unmowed.

“There’s a map in the glove compartment,” Abbot said. Jack reached over the back of the seat and pulled it open. As they passed an intersection, Jack noted the street names, and within moments knew where they were.

“We’re nearly to the west edge of town,” Jack said.

“That’s fine,” Abbot told him. There was a gas station up ahead. He pulled in and parked by the phone booth. He got out to make a call, and Jack got out of the back seat and into the front.

Abbot was back in just a moment. “Just in case we don’t get back across the bay,” he said, “we’re going to make a little report to the fifth column.”

File Twenty-two: Friday Afternoon

They drove back to O'Banion on Carpenter, on the edge of town, then turned west on O'Banion and on out into the country, to an old and somewhat rundown neighborhood development that had never been completed after the arrival of the Visitors.

Abbot pulled in at what had once been the sales office. It was now abandoned, its windows broken, trash piled up on the front porch. Jack and Abbot got out of the car, went around to the back door, and went inside. A Visitor was waiting for them.

"How's it going, Douglas?" the Visitor asked, shaking Abbot's hand,

"Just a little hectic, Walter," Abbot said. "This is Jack Page."

"Pleased to meet you," Walter said. "You look like you've had a little trouble."

Jack looked down at himself. His jacket was torn and stained with oil from his roll under the truck, his slacks were ruined, even his turtleneck shirt was ripped. "Just a little bit," he said.

"So what happened, Douglas?" Walter asked, and Abbot quickly told him about their visit.

"It's unfortunate," Walter said when Abbot finished. "Security here has been tight enough as it is, and now it's going to get worse."

"We didn't have much choice," Abbot said, "once Hickory made us."

"I know, I'm not blaming you. Your people have been keeping us pretty well informed, so I know most of what's been going on down in Freeport. We're onto something big here, Douglas, and if we can just figure out what it is, and what to do about it, we should be able to make all this effort pay off."

"We got an awful lot of stuff out of that secret prison," Abbot said. "When we get it translated—"

“I’ve heard about it. Most of it is just prison records, interesting in and of themselves, but not of much use to us. The rest of it doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“What about the references to extra low frequency radiation?” Jack asked.

“Plenty of that, but we don’t know what it means. Look, this stuff is going to be useful, but none of the people who’ve read any of it so far have any background in that subject, or in the others covered in those documents. There may be profound secrets there, but we’ve got to get this stuff to experts, who know what it’s all about. And that’s going to take a while.”

“We’re not going to just sit back and wait,” Abbot said.

“I’m not suggesting it. We don’t know Dwight’s timetable, and he might decide to speed things up because of all the trouble you’ve caused him.”

“You think Dwight’s behind all this?” Jack asked.

“I think so. If I could prove that he was operating against policy, I could plant some suggestions that might get him investigated, possibly relieved of his responsibilities. But that would take several weeks at least. And he’s been very careful. Or else he’s really not as important as I think he is. We’ve not been able to dig up anything we could use against him.”

“Show him the photos, Jack,” Abbot said.

Jack took the copies from his inside jacket pocket. They were creased and wrinkled now, slightly torn and smudged. But the faces were still clear. Walter looked at them for a long time.

“So this is Hickory,” he said. “I’ve never met him, but I know him by reputation. He’s in intelligence, not communications. Can I keep a copy?”

“Sure,” Jack said, “I’ve got another.”

“Good. Now that we can identify him, we might be able to do something about him. I’ll pass this around.” He folded the photocopy and put it away in his uniform. “The big question is, how do all these people tie in together?”

“You’ve asked the prize winner,” Jack said. “Maybe there’s more than one conspiracy, and this is all just coincidence.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute,” Walter said. “Let’s look at what we know. Dwight, Vincent Kline, and Charles Anthony Oswald were in fact conferring, in secret, illegally, in Freeport. That’s not coincidence, that’s deliberate.

“Secondly, Dwight has been actively involved in developing communications systems. That’s not his department, though it can be justified in terms of human-Visitor relations. But this studio you just messed up has nothing to do with humans. He was also one of those who worked to try to get permission to build a similar studio down in Freeport.

“Third, somebody is conducting some kind of experiments involving extra low frequency radiation, and they’ve been doing it in Freeport. Dwight is involved with that, but is he in charge? We don’t know. Hickory is also involved, and it seems more likely that the connection is through him, as an intelligence officer.

“Then, we have the unproven but obvious fact that Freeport’s police department, and city government, are in some kind of collusion with organized crime down there. There’s nothing confusing or unbelievable about that.” “Taken individually,” Jack said.

“Exactly. Oswald and Kline. Fine. Crime pressures government, gets the freedom to operate. Government uses crime, ensures its power. No problem. Oswald and Dwight, no problem. We could assume a straightforward case of espionage and treason. Dwight and Kline could work together, there’s a fortune to be made in the black market, for both of them, though that situation would be a little more complicated than just that. It’s all three of them together that doesn’t make sense.”

“A highly unlikely triumvirate,” Abbot agreed. “And it poses the further question, which one is really the boss?” “Let’s drop that for the moment,” Walter said. “That’s old. The new element is this ELF business.”

“There was something,” Jack said, “about ELF’s effects on the human body and mind. What have you learned about that?”

“Not much, we don’t understand that jargon. It seems that ELF does have an effect, both physiological and psychological. Depending on how this radiation is

applied, it can make a person nervous, or calm, or excited, or lethargic, or sick, or mask sickness. It can make them drowsy, or alert. What we're lacking is any clear indication of the objectives of this research."

"It still sounds like mind control to me," Abbot said. "Mood control, perhaps," Walter said, "but surely not thought control."

"Mood control could be very effective," Jack said, "in and of itself."

"Agreed, but what mood? To what purpose? We don't know enough yet to form a reasonable hypothesis." "Then let's forget it," Jack said, "until we know more. How does that studio at the Fairfield Mail tie in?"

"So far as I can tell," Walter said, "it doesn't. But you were there, how did it seem to you?"

"It's a penny-ante setup," Abbot said. "It looked just like any other small-town station I've ever seen."

"They didn't try to hide anything from you? No secret studios, no concealed equipment?"

"About the only thing we didn't see," Jack said, "were Dwight's offices and the bathrooms. Debra Walston was completely open with us. I believe she would have bought whatever Abbot might have offered her, if she could." "So you agree, then, that that station is just a false trail." "I would," Abbot said, "if TV didn't figure into this whole business so many times already."

"Now wait a minute," Jack said. "One of the things Carpentier told me was that she was reluctant to talk about doing that job because of technological secrets of some kind."

"There was nothing at Fairfield that fits in with that," Abbot said. "I recognized every piece of equipment there. " "Then what kind of technology would Carpentier be afraid to talk about?"

"I don't know, but it's a good point. I think we ought to talk to her again. Maybe, now, we can convince her to tell us what she knows."

"If," Walter said, "she's not just covering up some personal indiscretion."

“If she is,” Abbot said, “then we’d better find out about it, so we can eliminate it. What I’m concerned about right now, however, is finding out where Dwight is. He might not be the mastermind, but he’s the key, I’m sure.”

“I agree,” Walter said. “He’s the one whom we can tie, one way or another, reasonable or not, to every other element. There’s nothing between Kline and TV, for example.”

“That we know of,” Jack said. “But I know for a fact that he was the one who kidnapped Emily Velasquez, even if she wound up in a Visitor prison. Kline’s the one who sent his heavies after me, to find out about those photos. He’s the one who’s the chief of a secret empire, and in many ways stands to gain or lose the most from any disruption of government or change in relations between Northampton and Freeport.”

“You may be right,” Walter said, “but I still think Dwight is the key. And we’re going to do our best to find him. In the meantime, have you been able to do anything about Oswald? Or about Kline for that matter?”

“Not much,” Abbot admitted. “We don’t have extensive contacts in the first place, and everybody seems to be slacking off for some reason. I got only two out of nine people to help break Miss Velasquez out of that prison. Can you believe it? We do have some people we can trust on the police force, and they’ve been helpful already. And we know we can trust the assistant city attorney, and we’re trying to get him what he needs so that he can initiate an open investigation without fear for his life. But we’ve not been able to do anything with the mob at all. It’s been very frustrating.”

“I’m sure it has been,” Walter said. “But keep on trying. Now look, it’s getting late, and you’re going to have to get back to Freeport.”

“We’ve spent too much time here already,” Jack said. “I want to make sure Emily’s all right, and we’re not going to be able to go back the way we came.”

“We’ll take the second bridge west,” Abbot said. “It will take about an hour and a half longer, unfortunately. ” “That’s what’s got me worried.”

“It’s a safe house, Jack, she’ll be all right.”

“It’s not the house I’m worried about, it’s Dahlgren.” “Now come on, you saw fit

to trust him this morning.” “It’s not that, dammit.”

“It’s his being left alone with Emily.”

“Yes. Though why that should make any difference now ...”

“You can’t,” Walter said, “let your personal interests interfere with what has to be done.”

“Dammit, it was my personal interest that uncovered this mess in the first place. It was because of my personal interest that we got Emily out of that prison, instead of just picking up a bunch of documents we can’t read or understand.”

“He’s right, Walter,” Abbot said. “We’ve learned more from a few of Emily’s jumbled memories than from that other stuff.”

“Sorry,” Walter said. “But that reminds me, if she was subjected to some of our interrogation methods, it’s very likely that they may also have tried to convert her at some time.”

“There was conversion equipment there,” Abbot said. “And if that’s the case,” Walter went on, “even if it wasn’t completely successful, it could have subtle and long-reaching effects.”

“My God,” Jack said, “I never even thought of that.” “So what can we do about it?” Abbot asked. “We’re just going to have to let that pass until we take care of the situation at hand.”

“Dammit, Abbot,” Jack said, “that is the situation at hand. You admitted it yourself, we learned more from Emily than from almost anything else we’ve done. Her loss of memory of the events following her kidnapping is not typical. She has full recall of every detail prior to that, and that should be what she’s forgotten.” He turned to Walter. “Can conversion make you forget things?”

“You can be forced to forget things, as a part of the process.”

“All right then. Emily was right there. They not only asked her questions, they talked about things in front of her. Why would they do that unless they knew she would not be able to tell anybody else?”

“They thought that,” Abbot said, “because they thought she was going to remain a prisoner.”

“Then why did they mess with her memory at all?” “We don’t know that they did, the trauma of the experience—”

“Bullshit. That’s what I was just telling you. Trauma erases memories prior to the event. Her memory is confused after the event.”

“It works that way too, sometimes.”

“I know it, but—”

“You’re wasting your time, Jack.”

“I don’t think so,” Walter said. “Even if they didn’t deliberately scramble her memories, they could have planted something in her mind, to make her turn against you at some time. We know they released every one of their captives after a few hours or a few days. They might have had every intention of turning Miss Velasquez loose, once they had completed the conversion process.”

“So what do we do?” Jack asked.

“Emily will have to be examined by an expert and deconverted. That should also clear up most if not all of her memories. The trouble is, a full deconversion would require the kind of lab that exists only in certain places in California and North Carolina, or up on a mothership.

“But we do have access to an expert. I’ll arrange to have her smuggled down to Freeport, and we can decide what to do with Emily after she’s been examined. At the very least, we can counter the worst of the side effects.”

“All right,” Abbot said. “I guess it’s worth the effort.” “You’re damn straight,” Jack said.

File Twenty-three: Friday Evening

When they got to Freeport, nearly two hours later, Jack asked Abbot to drop him off at the Carter House hotel. “I need a change of clothes,” he said, “and I should check in with my office.”

“Can’t you just let that wait?”

“My secretary is going to wonder where the hell I am, my clients are going to be angry, and I want some clean clothes.”

“Okay, but be careful.”

Feeling conspicuous in his soiled and torn clothes, Jack went into the hotel where he paid for another night. The clerk tactfully said nothing about his appearance. When he got to his room he stripped off his clothes, and at long last was able to undo the straps that held his false arm in place. He was sore and chafed. The arm was a bit dented from his roll under the truck and collision with the stair rail, but otherwise unharmed.

He took a long, hot shower, working the soreness and fatigue out of his muscles. He needed a shave, but he’d forgotten to pack his razor. Maybe the hotel could sell him one. He dressed in clean if rumpled slacks, turtleneck, and jacket, and called down to room service for shaving supplies, and ordered some supper as well. Then he called his office.

Though it was getting late in the afternoon, Mrs. McKinley was still there. “Where have you been?” she demanded. “Mrs. Turpin was furious. Mr. Skelley really needed to see you. And—”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. McKinley, I ran into some trouble last night.”

Mrs. McKinley was silent for a long moment. “I see,” she said at last. “I think I understand. It has to do with that phone call you got Monday evening, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” he said, knowing she was referring to Emily’s frantic call. “All I can

say right now is that things are a lot worse than I expected they would be.”

“I’m sorry. Is she all right?”

“She’s alive.”

“I’m so glad. I should tell you that a Lt. LeGrange has been into the office several times today to see you. The police seem to think you had something to do with a murder, which I don’t believe for a minute.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. McKinley, it’s true, but it was self defense, not murder, however they’re making it look.” “Oh, dear. But if it was self defense . . . ?”

“It was, but I have reason to believe that Lt. LeGrange is working with the mob. He was the one who refused to do anything about that phone call you mentioned.”

“Oh, dear, I see. But are you sure? He seemed like such a nice man.”

“I’m not sure, Mrs. McKinley, but I’ve been betrayed once already, and I don’t dare take any chances. And I don’t want you to take any chances either. I just wanted to let you know that I’m all right, but that I won’t be back to the office for a while, a couple days at least. Cancel all my appointments for the next week. If I don’t get back to you by next Friday, then start referring my clients to other psychologists and doctors. And start looking for another job yourself.”

“I most certainly will not look for another job. I work for you because I enjoy it, not because I need the money.”

“I appreciate that, Mrs. McKinley. Now look, if the police come around again, you cooperate with them in any way you can. Tell them about this phone call if they ask. Keep yourself out of this mess as much as possible. I’ve got enough to worry about as it is, I—” He was interrupted by a knock at his door. “I’ll try to call you next week,” he said, and hung up before she could protest.

He answered the door. It was room service, with his supper and a shaving kit. He paid and tipped the bellhop lavishly. He ate quickly, then shaved, having difficulty with the safety razor. Then he cleaned and reloaded his gun.

There was no sense waiting around the hotel any longer, even though he wanted

a good long nap, so he let himself out of the room. Waiting for him, right in front of the door, was Marty Patrushka, gun drawn.

“Back inside,” Patrushka said, “and keep your hands up.”

Jack backed through the still-open door. Patrushka advanced with him, step for step, and swung the door shut when he was inside.

“You’ve been causing us a lot of trouble,” Patrushka said. “But that’s all over now, and you’re going to start telling us just about everything we want to know.”

“I’m not very impressed,” Jack said, “if they sent you all alone.”

“I came alone because one is enough. Now drop your gun on the floor.”

Jack carefully took the gun out of his coat pocket and did what he was told. Patrushka kicked it into the corner of the room.

“Okay,” Patrushka said, “how’d you find out where we were keeping Velasquez?”

“It’s a long story,” Jack said.

Patrushka struck him across the face with the back of his hand, knocking him backward into the chair by the night table. “So tell it,” he snarled, striding up to lean over him, his gun aimed at the middle of Jack’s chest.

Jack flung himself and the chair over sideways, kicking up at the same time, between Patrushka’s legs. He landed on his right side, rolled to his face with his knees bent under him, and pushed up and back, smashing backwards into Patrushka’s half-doubled-up form.

They fell to the floor together, Jack on top, and he tried to roll free, but his false arm couldn’t support him and he fell on his face. Patrushka, lying on his back, was bringing his gun around in a high arc, aiming for Jack’s head. Jack raised his false arm and took the blow, feeling no pain, but hearing plastic crack.

Patrushka reached back to strike again. Jack swung his false arm down, smashing into Patrushka’s face. Patrushka’s blow went wild, but at the same time he kicked out, striking Jack just below the right knee.

The pain was like a hot wire, running all the way up his leg to his hip. Jack, half on his face, flailed again and again with his left arm. He lacked the strength in the artificial limb to strike a solid blow, but its unyielding surface smashed Patrushka's face, spattering blood.

When Patrushka dropped his gun to protect his face, Jack rolled away and struggled to his knees. But before he could get to his feet Patrushka reached up and grabbed his false arm, jerking him back on top of him. Jack felt his arm give, and Patrushka must have felt it too, because he let go at once.

Jack jackknifed his knees into Patrushka's side, knocking the breath out of him, and jerked upright. He turned toward the corner where his gun was lying, but Patrushka grabbed his ankle and he fell on his face. Patrushka pulled on his legs, dragging Jack back, but Jack's hand closed on the gun and he rolled over once again, brought the gun around right into Patrushka's grinning face, and fired.

The bullet produced a small, black hole just above Patrushka's browline. The back of Patrushka's head came off, brains and blood spattering across the room. He fell on Jack's knees, bleeding between Jack's legs.

Jack extricated himself from the body and climbed to his feet. He stood there a moment, panting, his right leg nearly buckling, his right hand trembling so hard that he nearly dropped the gun.

He stepped away from the body and the spreading pool of blood. He had to get out of there before somebody came to investigate the shot, but his left arm wasn't working. He put the gun down on the night table and took off first his jacket, then his turtleneck. It wasn't easy.

One of the straps which held his artificial arm in place was half torn through, and two buckles had come undone. Jack quickly but carefully refastened his arm, then put his turtleneck and jacket back on. His jacket was badly rumpled, but the only blood spots were down around his lower legs. He dropped the gun into his jacket pocket and, leaving his clothes and suitcase, left the room.

He took the elevator down to the lobby, thinking about his car back at the safe house on Berry. He walked to a phone booth on the corner of US 18 and Marlin, just a short block away, and called a taxi. Fortunately, it came within moments.

He got out at the shopping center on south US 18 and walked up Wyndham to

Berry, a block beyond Wade Avenue, then south on Berry the block to the safe house. It was a beautiful summer evening, and the events of just moments before seemed unreal.

Sally Greenstreet met him at the door.

“Good God,” she said as she let him in. “What happened to you?”

“We don’t have Marty Patrushka to kick around any more,” Jack said. “Do you have any aspirin?”

“Yes, I think so, you need a drink?”

“Anything you’ve got.” He went over to sit sprawled on the couch while Sally went in search of medicaments. Before she came back Marvin Dahlgren came in from the bedroom area.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Dahlgren said. “We’d heard you’d had a fight—”

“Patrushka found out I was staying at the Carter House. He’s dead.”

“You’re damn amazing, you know that?”

“Who the hell cares,” Jack said as Sally came back with two aspirin and a tumbler full of whiskey. “How’s Emily?” “Somebody came over just a few minutes ago,” Sally

said, “a deconversion expert Walter sent. You talked with Walter?”

“Yeah, not that long ago.” He tossed the aspirin into his mouth and washed them down with bourbon. “Where’s Abbot?”

“He’s not here, he had something else to do.”

“So where’s this expert?”

“In the bedroom with Emily,” Dahlgren said. “We just got her equipment set up.”

“I wanna see her,” Jack said, struggling to his feet. The pain in his right leg was easing off, but his artificial left arm felt a little clumsy.

“Come on back,” Dahlgren said, and led him to the bedroom where Emily was lying. Standing beside the bed was a red-haired woman, who looked too young to be an expert in anything, dressed in a pastel blue skirt and blouse. Her face was very plain, but when she looked up at Jack and smiled, she was utterly charming.

On either side of the head of the bed were gray metal boxes, each the size of a two-drawer filing cabinet. Wires led from the boxes to a loose helmet on Emily’s head.

“She’s going to be all right,” the red-haired Visitor said. “I’m Sylvia. You must be Dr. Page.”

Emily opened her eyes and looked up at Jack. His heart lurched. “Dr. Page,” she said, and his heart lurched again, but this time with disappointment. She would have called him Jack if she felt anything for him. “What happened to you?” Emily asked.

“Marty Patrushka will never kidnap anybody again,” Jack said softly. Emily’s eyes got large. She had such beautiful eyes, Jack thought.

“You killed him,” Emily said.

“Yes ”

“I’m glad,” Emily said. Then she sat up, put her hands on the helmet, looked at Sylvia who nodded, and took the helmet off. “It must have been terrible,” she said.

“It was. But that’s all over now. How are you doing?” “I think I’m going to be all right,” Emily said. “I don’t remember being converted, and yet Sylvia has already been able to clear my mind a little bit.”

“It’s going to take a lot longer,” Sylvia said, “but Emily’s conversion was only partial, and limited in scope, so we should be able to bring her back to normal in just a few weeks.”

“That’s very good to hear,” Jack said.

“And guess what?” Emily said, her eyes bright. “Marvin talked to Ms.

Carpentier this afternoon, and it looks like we're going to get the contract after all. Can you imagine? The entire public area of WCTY, plus Ms. Carpentier's offices, and maybe more later."

"That's terrific," Jack said, forcing himself to smile. He was happy for her, but the way she looked at Dahlgren told him more than words. "You were discreet," he said to Dahlgren.

"Like I told you, that's one subject about which I know everything."

"It's not going to be easy," Emily said, "working through Marvin as though I weren't there. How soon do you think it will be before I can go back to my office? Joyce doesn't even know I'm alive."

"Not real soon," Jack said. "The situation is getting more complicated. You're going to have to stay in hiding for a while I'm afraid. There's more than your life at stake. " "I understand. You've been wonderful, Dr. Page."

"I think I should get back to work now," Sylvia said. "I can keep this equipment out only so long before people start asking questions."

"All right," Jack said. He smiled at Emily again, then turned and walked blindly from the room.

"You need another drink," Dahlgren said when they got back to the living room.

"Yeah, I guess I do," Jack said. Sally, watching out the front window, turned to look at him.

"You care for her, don't you?" Dahlgren asked as he went over to a side cabinet.

"Is it obvious?"

"Not to everybody. But I've known Emily for a long time, and I've been watching you. She's a pretty nice lady, Jack."

"I think so." He took the glass Dahlgren offered him before fixing himself one. "Obviously you do too." "She's smart," Dahlgren said. Sally came over to fix herself something. "She's got a real talent. She should be in New York, not stuck down here in a town where there's nowhere further to go. She's a good partner,

and a good friend.” He raised his glass to Jack.

“Am I wasting my time?” Jack asked, after returning the salute.

“I don’t know. I suspect so.”

“She’s in love with you, you know.”

“I figured that out a while back.”

“And you?”

“I told you what I think about Emily. But I wouldn’t turn her down if she ever made up her mind.”

“So what am I going to do?” Jack asked rhetorically, feeling a bitterness he had not felt even when he’d lost his arm.

“Nothing,” Sally said. “At least not now. Not until we’ve all come through this mess alive. If we do.”

The doorbell rang. Sally went to answer it. It was Walter, dressed in black workpants and a navy sweatshirt.

“Where’s Abbot?” he asked at once.

“He hasn’t come back yet,” Jack said.

“Damn. All right, we’ve been doing some pretty heavy research on Dwight,” he said. “We’ve known for a while that he seems to have more influence with the higher ranks than he has any right to. He’s second in charge of human-Visitor relationships—read minister of propaganda—but that’s not a very important office here. In St. Louis, in Boston, yes, but not down here.

“He’s got connections, private connections mind you, with the higher bureaucracy—our people are prone to the same kind of corruption you’re suffering from here in Freeport, after all. Consider that a large portion of his activities have not been made a matter of public record. Those of us within the hierarchy who might be expected to know something about what he’s doing have not been informed. If anybody has reason to ask, they are told simply that it’s

none of their business.

“Most of the time, so what? But I’m Northampton’s procurement officer. It’s my job to obtain human goods for our use, live animals for food, and special electronics, such as those used to equip that TV station in the Fairfield Mall. Dwight, as unofficial minister of propaganda, has to work with me on occasion. He’s supposed to enact programs that will make it easier for me to do my job. I’m supposed to consult with him to tell him what I want, so he can put out the right word. I tried to get an interview with him, shortly after we talked, and I was just shut off. No explanation, no future date, no nothing.”

“So somebody’s covering up for him,” Sally said. “Just his own staff?”

“In fact, now that you mention it, yes.”

“You didn’t try to get to him outside of regular channels?”

“No, I didn’t. I should have.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jack said. “Except that it might have told us whether the whole bureaucracy was behind him, or whether he was on his own.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Walter said. “I was calling on him with a trumped up problem, and didn’t really have anything to say.”

“But the fact,” Sally said, “that he’s incommunicado is still significant. To me, that says he’s the key to this conspiracy.”

“I agree,” Walter said, “but it gives us absolutely no idea as to what it’s all about. The only positive thing is that our fifth column is working up a plan to either remove Hickory from Northampton, by legitimate bureaucratic means if we can, or by assassination if we must. But that doesn’t involve you people down here in Freeport. I just wish you had an organization that could move against Kline in the same way.”

“Kline,” Sally said, “is probably the hardest person in Freeport to kill. He’s far too used to protecting himself.” “What about Oswald?” Walter asked.

“We still don’t know that he’s guilty of anything,” Sally said, “and even if he were, he’s also well protected.” “What about Annette?” Jack asked.

“That’s another thing,” Walter said. “The official report is that she has been accused of treason and taken to the mothership over Atlanta. She’s guilty, of course, in the eyes of our law.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Sally asked. “Absolutely nothing. The days are past when a solitary hero like Mike Donovan could penetrate a mothership and single-handedly effect a daring rescue. No, Annette is lost. I just hope to hell that the person who turned her in gets retribution.”

“He used to be a friend of mine,” Jack said. “But if I meet him again, he will die.”

“Have you found out anything more about the Fairfield studio?” Dahlgren asked.

“Nothing that’s of any help,” Walter said. “As far as I’ve been able to tell, it’s perfectly legitimate. It conforms to all human, Visitor, and interspecies regulations, and does just what it is supposed to do.”

“I don’t know anything about TV technology,” Jack said, “but Abbot’s an expert, and he said that it was not a very sophisticated operation. And I’ve been thinking about that. They asked Vanessa Carpentier, the president of WCTY and an expert on broadcast technology, to help them set that studio up. Why? The impression I got from Abbot was that any good engineer could have done the same job. Why pay the price of an expert they couldn’t use or afford?” “I don’t know, Dr. Page,” Walter said. “All I can tell you is that, at least in Northampton, there has been no secrecy about the studio whatsoever. The only thing we don’t know is the whereabouts of its director, Dwight.” Jack became aware, while Walter was talking, that Emily had come into the room.

“Are you all right?” he said to her. “Is Sylvia done now?”

“I’m okay,” Emily said. “Sylvia’s packing up. She’ll be back tomorrow. But I couldn’t help but overhear what you were talking about. While Sylvia was working with me, some things kept popping up in my mind. I don’t know if they mean anything or not, but ...”

“Let us decide,” Jack said. He watched with a sinking heart as Emily went to go stand beside Dahlgren, who put his arm around her.

“I remember,” Emily said as she laid her head on Dahlgren’s chest, “one time

while Dwight was questioning me about who I had showed the pictures to. A technician came in, and said something like they had verified that there were no shadows.”

Jack looked at Dahlgren, who did not return his glance. “No shadows?” he repeated.

“I have no idea what he was talking about,” Emily said. “That’s all I remember, there were no shadows.”

“Shadows in a room?” Jack asked. “Where were the shadows?”

“I don’t remember,” Emily said.

“We were just talking about TV broadcasting,” Sally said. “How about broadcast shadows?”

“Yes!” Emily said, “that’s right, Dr. Page was saying something about TV engineers, and the thought just came into my mind. I don’t know why.”

“Let’s think about this,” Walter said. “The Fairfield studio has a broadcast tower, on the bluff just north of town, so that the signal can reach the whole city. Tall buildings with all that steel in their structure, block regular broadcast signals, and hence cast a kind of shadow. And unless you have a special antenna, if you’re in a radio shadow, you can’t pick up the channel.”

“I wish Abbot was here,” Jack said.

“But the technician said nothing about a tower,” Emily said. “It was more like, dammit, ‘we’ve verified that there are no shadows from the studio.’ Or something like that.”

“A figure of speech,” Walter said. “That’s the way they refer to the Fairfield studio-tower configuration.”

“Okay,” Jack said, “but look. TV broadcasting has been a thread in this mystery all along. Sometimes it’s pretty obscure, but sometimes it seems to be important.”

“So what’s the connection, Jack?” Sally asked.

“I don’t know. But Vanessa Carpentier might. She’s an expert in broadcast technology, she supervised the installation of the Fairfield studio, and she’s refused to talk about that job in part because of the technology involved. She’s the one we’ve got to talk to about this.”

“Then let’s do it, Jack,” Walter said. “Do you know how to get in touch with her?”

Jack went to the phone and dialed her number. She answered in person.

“Page here,” he said, but before he could speak further, she started talking.

“Dr. Page, I’ve been trying to get a hold of you all afternoon. All your secretary would say was that you were out.”

“I was. What did you want to talk to me about?” “I’ve been thinking over our conversation of the other day. And there have been some disturbing things on the news—about you among other things. If you hadn’t told me what you had, I would have just dismissed those stories without any further thought. But taking everything together, I decided I should try to get in touch with you.” “You’re in touch with me now,” Jack said.

“I don’t want to talk on the phone. Can you meet me? At Toby’s Club? It’s right across from the Delmark Building, on the diagonal comer.”

“I can do that,” Jack said. “I’ll be bringing some people with me.”

“That’s all right. I just don’t trust the security in this building anymore. If I don’t make it, come looking for me, will you?”

“Sure thing, but you’ll make it. What time?”

“As soon as you can get there.”

“Fifteen minutes,” Jack said. “Half an hour at the most.” And then she hung up.

“I can’t go with you,” Walter said. “I shouldn’t be in Freeport at all.”

“No problem,” Jack told him. “I’ll let you know whatever she tells me.”

“But I have to go,” Emily said. “Ms. Carpentier might say something that will bring more of my memory back.” “Then I’ll go with you,” Dahlgren said.

“No,” Sally told him. “Somebody has to be here to tell Abbot where we are when he gets back.”

“I don’t like it,” Dahlgren said.

“I’ll be all right, Marvin,” Emily said. “Sally and Dr. Page will take care of me.”

“I know they will,” Dahlgren said. “AH right, you’d better get going.”

They took Jack’s car to Toby’s Club. Located on the corner of Garfield and Howard, it was an expensive dinner club that was finding its trade better than ever, since people with money to spend had little where else to go.

It was a Friday night, and the place was crowded. They worked their way through the jam of tables toward the back of the club, where they found Vanessa Carpentier sitting at a table against the far wall.

“I apologize for bringing you out this way,” Carpentier said as their waiter came over. “Please feel free to order whatever you wish.”

During the course of their meal, Jack, Emily, and Sally explained all that they knew about TV studios, and extra low frequency radiation, as it applied to the problem at hand. By the time dinner was over and cocktails were on the table, there was nothing left to say, and it was Carpentier’s turn. But she sat for a long time, just sipping her brandy.

“You know,” she said at last, “I figured out on the second day of that Northampton job that any competent engineer could have done what I had been hired to do. But they were paying me good money, why not take it? Besides, I pride myself in doing a good job.

“But you know, Dwight, and Hickory, and Patrushka were always around. And that was odd, since they each of them supposedly had more important things to do. Still, I was flattered, they talked intelligently, and asked me things which I could answer easily and brilliantly.

“They were very casual about it. I placed no importance on their interest until

Dr. Page's last visit to me. And then I began to think about it. Not all of their questions were trivial. Some of them were very significant indeed, though I didn't realize that until just a little while ago. And now your talking about ELF confirms my suspicions.

"I don't think they had any interest in what I could do for them in the way of setting up that silly studio of theirs. I think they were setting me up very carefully so that they could pick my mind."

"What about?" Jack asked quietly when she stopped talking and started staring into her brandy glass.

"One of my specialties," Carpentier said, "as an engineer, is the technique of superimposing one signal over another. There are plenty of legitimate and useful applications for this, it's a typical communications problem, in one form or another. The telephone company has to superimpose hundreds or thousands of messages on a single signal, for example. We talked about that a lot, and about separating the signals or messages after they had been received. Especially TV signals. On a single channel. You know," she said, "that when we broadcast a TV program, we actually broadcast several different signals at once, the picture, the sound, and the information that makes the picture appear on the right place on your screen.

"Well, that was only a part of it, but they were very subtle, and very clever, and I didn't notice it at the time. But they also talked—so casually, so nonchalantly—about another specialty of mine.

"I have a master's degree in communications theory," she said, "and one of the things I studied was subliminal perception and its possible exploitation in advertising. It was a fascinating subject, and I learned a lot about how brief a message could be before it was imperceptible, how certain messages could be misinterpreted, various problems of ambiguity, misreading, and so on. It was only this morning, thinking about Dr. Page's last conversation, that I realized that I'd talked a lot about that while I was supposedly supervising the installation of that studio up in Northampton."

"They milked you dry," Jack said.

"I'm afraid so. I didn't see how what I had to say could relate to anything important. Looking back on it, it seems so clear to me now that the Visitors

wanted to have a studio in Freeport so that they could send subliminal propaganda to all the TV viewers here.”

“How would they get anybody to watch their channel?” Sally asked.

“They wouldn’t. And this is one of the things I didn’t want to talk to Dr. Page about. They’d superimpose their signal on top of another, say WCTY, or WDBS, and the subliminal messages would be received at the same time people were watching a regular program.”

“Wouldn’t that cause a lot of interference?” Jack asked. “Not if they used some of the signal modulation techniques I’ve developed—and about which I talked far too much. I’ve run tests at WCTY and was able to superimpose a separately broadcast caption over a regularly broadcast picture without detectable distortion or interference. Close captioning is a similar thing, but my technique permits superimposition from a totally separate studio and eliminates other synchronization problems.”

“Could they be sending such a signal from the Fairfield Mall?” Sally asked.

“Not with the equipment they have there. If they’re doing what I think they’re doing, they’ll need another studio somewhere else, one that can transmit carefully modulated extra low frequency signals, or rather, signals that would cause a regular TV set to produce ELF radiation.” “Such signals,” Jack said, “would certainly be subliminal, if they could be detected at all. But how would they carry any pictorial or verbal information?”

“They couldn’t, of course. But ELF can affect mood, can’t it? Couldn’t they send a signal to make people feel trustful at the same time that the regular program was showing pictures of Visitors?”

“They could, but you can’t guarantee that every individual would feel trust—whatever that is. It’s too complex an emotion to simulate with any kind of electronics we know today. We can heighten emotion, but whether that heightened emotion is perceived as fear or lust is something we can’t predict.”

“How about this,” Sally said. “They send a regular verbal message, but reinforce it with ELF Is that possible?”

“I suppose so,” Jack said.

“They’d have no difficulty sending two messages from the same transmitter,” Carpentier said. “But to what purpose?”

“Haven’t you noticed,” Sally said, “that people are feeling an awful lot less anxious about Visitors these days?” “Yes, I have,” Jack said. “A lot of my clients have decided they don’t need my help anymore, which is fine except that they’re all deciding it at the same time.” “Exactly,” Sally said. “In spite of everything, there’s been a general lowering of tension between humans and Visitors for, oh, the last month or so. Now if Dwight started building a secret studio somewhere six months ago, could that have been in operation by one month ago?”

“Easily,” Carpentier said, “if he had most of the equipment he wanted in the beginning.”

“That makes me think,” Jack said. “Walter said something about Dwight ordering special equipment for the Fairfield studio.”

“Right,” Sally said. “But you didn’t see any of it there. And we’ve all noticed a change in human attitudes toward Visitors during the last month or so, and it’s possible for Dwight to have started sending his subliminal signals since about that time.”

“I still don’t see,” Jack said, “how ELF, or even more standard subliminal messages, could have the effect you’re describing.”

“I don’t know much about psychology,” Carpentier said, “but I do know that improperly shielded electronics devices that leak a significant amount of ELF are a health hazard. They cause mood changes, irritability, sometimes stupor, things like that. So what if Dwight and his people had figured out just what particular ELF frequency had what effect on the human mind? What if they could send a signal superimposed over Channel 7, say, so that when you watched the news, you also got a dose of ELF, carefully chosen so that you would feel only positive feelings whenever Visitors or Northampton were mentioned? You wouldn’t need a verbal or visual image, other than the one you could see on Channel 7.”

“It doesn’t work quite that way,” Jack said, “but then, I’d have to see their equipment, run a few tests. Which is what they were doing in that prison of theirs. Are you sure the studio in Northampton wouldn’t be able to do the job you describe?”

“Not unless they’d ripped everything out that I installed and replaced it with new equipment.”

“And Abbot said that it was all old equipment. Nothing seemed out of place to him.”

“If you’re talking about Douglas Abbot, then he would know. He supplies us with almost all our equipment. But there’s another thing. The Northampton transmitter has two problems. One, it’s too low power. It’s just not strong enough to cover Freeport with a good, clear signal. Second, where it’s located, most of Freeport would be in shadow, and couldn’t receive the signals at all.”

“That’s the thing,” Emily said. “The shadow I heard Dwight and the technician talking about.”

“Yes, it is,” Carpentier said. “All the high rises, the tall buildings would shield most of southern Freeport, and if Northampton is going to engage in some kind of expensive and subtle propaganda move, they wouldn’t tolerate that kind of reduced coverage. What they want is a good, high tower somewhere where they can blanket all of Freeport at the same time. Strong signals would have less of a problem with shadows, but then they’d be detected as interference, so they’d use very weak signals, and that means a higher tower to get full coverage.”

“There is a tower like that,” Sally said, “in Freeport. The WCTY tower above the Delmark Building.”

“I know for a fact,” Carpentier said, “that the Visitors have had no access to that tower, never have had. It’s inspected frequently, and any tampering would have been noted. If you like, you can come see for yourselves.” “Do they really need a tower?” Jack asked.

“The only purpose of the tower,” Carpentier said, “is to get the antenna high.”

“Then how about the Wagner Building? It’s not quite as tall as the WCTY tower, but it’s the tallest building in Freeport, and it’s only a couple blocks away, almost right in the middle of the city.”

“And they do have a mast on top,” Carpentier said. “It’s not designed to be a transmitting antenna, but it could be easily modified. And their studio—”

“Would be right up there on the top floor,” Jack said.

File Twenty-four: Friday Evening

When they left Toby's Club a short while later, Sally Greenstreet asked to be dropped off at the apartment building on Pine. From there, Jack and Emily drove back to the safe house on Berry. Emily was silent for most of the drive, and the few words she spoke were grim, revealing her fear of the present situation.

"I guess there's one thing to be cheerful about," she said when they pulled into the driveway. "Crazy as it may seem, it's that all this is real, and not just my imagination. We'd all be better off if it had turned out to be a delusion after all. I almost wish it were, when I think about what it means, but really I'm glad it's not, I'm glad I'm not crazy."

"I am too," Jack said.

Dahlgren was alone when they went in. "I just got a phone call from Abbot," he told Jack. "He's talked with

Sally, and he wants to move as soon as possible. You're to meet him at 207 North Wade Avenue at nine o'clock." "All right, did he say where he's been all day?"

"I asked him, but I don't think he trusts me completely. All he said was that he would be ready to move as soon as you got there. How did your meeting with Carpentier go?" "Just fine, we figured out that the Visitor's secret studio is in the Wagner Building."

"That's incredible," Dahlgren said, then turned to Emily. "Did you and Carpentier talk any business?"

"Not a word."

"Then I'll have to tell you what we talked about this afternoon." He put his hand on her shoulder and led her into the dining room, where there were sheets of paper spread out all over the table.

Jack stood there by the door, listening to them talk shop. He turned away and

went over to the liquor cabinet.

Well, he thought as he poured himself a small scotch, there was no sense crying about it. Emily was stuck on Dahlgren, and he couldn't really blame her. True, he'd gotten into this mess because of her. He'd fought and killed for her sake. And so what, she was interested in another guy-

Maybe it was time he changed his priorities. He had achieved his goal, Emily was safe now, or soon would be. If that was all he was interested in, he could just drop this whole business, go somewhere else, start a new practice up north where the Visitors weren't such a present danger.

Abbot would be disappointed, but Abbot didn't really need him. He just needed all the help he could get. And so did all of Freeport. Jack tossed back his drink and went into the dining room.

"There's no sense my sticking around here," he said. "I'm going on over there right now."

"I'll let him know you're coming," Dahlgren told him.

"Be careful," Emily said.

"I'll try," Jack said, then left the house.

The address on North Wade was an office building, with a book bindery to one side and a valve plant across the street. He parked on the street and when he went in the front door, Sally Greenstreet was waiting for him.

"You got here awfully early," she said as she took him upstairs on the elevator to the fourth floor.

"I was just wasting my time at the house," he said. "Where's Abbot been all afternoon?"

"Making arrangements for an attack on the secret studio. When I told him where it was, he decided to move at once. "

The office, at the far end of a rather dingy corridor, was marked "Atlantic Shipping and Storage." Sally led him into a back room, piled with boxes,

cartons, and crates. Abbot, Jenifer MacAlister, Samuel, and Walter were already there, as were two other people. One, a short, very muscular man wearing a dark gray suit, was introduced as the Orson Strangways who had called Dr. Jobs earlier in the long day. The other was a fifth columnist named Pedro, a tall, handsome Latin type, wearing a lightweight tan suit and an open-necked polo shirt.

“I thought you might want some time with Emily,” Abbot explained, “otherwise I’d have asked you to come sooner.”

“Emily has another friend,” Jack said. “What’s the plan?”

“We’re going to attack that secret studio tonight,” Abbot said. “We’re not going to wait, because after our appearance at Fairfield Mall this afternoon, they may decide to move, and we want to destroy that transmitter as soon as possible.”

“What if there’s really nothing there?” Strangways asked. His angular face was darkened by a heavy five o’clock shadow.

“Then,” Abbot said, “the sooner we find that out the better. Has everybody brought what I asked you to?” Strangways got up off the box he’d been sitting on and opened it. “There’s enough explosives in here,” he said, “to take off the whole top of the Wagner Building.” He handed book-sized packets to each of them. “It’s quite safe to handle, lightweight, and the electronic detonators are easy to use. I’ve got a few other things as well, but I’ll be handling those.”

“These are late-model lasers,” Pedro said, taking a Visitor hand weapon from a suitcase by his feet. “More effective than projectile weapons, fifty shots before recharging, and they’re silent.” He passed them around. Jack was reluctant to leave his own gun behind, so he just put it into his left-hand jacket pocket, and the Visitor gun into the right.

“I already had copies of the plans of the Wagner Building,” Jenifer said, “just in case we might need them someday. All I’ve got here are the top two floors.” She spread the reduced black-on-white blueprints out on a large crate. “And get this,” she said. “The company that holds the lease on these two floors is the parent company of the one that was renting Emily’s prison. They’ve been in the Wagner Building for two years.”

“They’ve been planning ahead,” Walter said.

“They have indeed. Now here’s the interesting thing about this place.” She pointed to a symbol on the plan. “That’s an access to a kind of a loft space above the top floor. It’s my guess that that’s where the transmitter will actually be located.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Abbot said. “That way they’d have a direct connection to the mast on the roof.”

“We can be pretty sure, however,” Jenifer went on, “that many of these partitions,” she pointed to thinner lines on both sheets of plans, “will have been moved around and changed. We should be able to get into the lower floor through one of these stairways here, and here. After that, we’ll just have to play it by ear.”

They discussed possibilities for a moment or two, then Strangways had them open their packets of explosives, showed them how to attach them to different kinds of surfaces, how to set the detonators, and how to time them. “Aren’t we moving awfully quickly?” Jack asked. “We may already be too late,” Walter said. “Annette has been under interrogation for a long time now. She’s strong, but she can’t hold out forever. And when she breaks, over half the fifth columnists in Northampton will be exposed, including myself. And that will happen whether we succeed tonight or not. I’ve already sent word out through the network, to give people a chance to hide or leave before Security starts making arrests. If Annette has talked already, we could be walking into a death trap. But if she hasn’t, this is the only opportunity we’ll have to stop whatever it is Dwight and his collaborators are up to.”

“Is your arm giving you trouble?” Abbot asked as Jack shifted the straps on his shoulder through the fabric of his jacket and turtleneck.

“Nothing to worry about,” Jack said. “A couple of the buckles are a little loose, that’s all.”

“I’ve never seen you adjust that thing before. What happened?”

“I got a surprise visit from Marty Patrushka this afternoon,” Jack said, and told them about the fight at the hotel.

“I don’t like it,” Abbot said. “If that arm’s not working right, maybe you should stay behind.”

“Not on your life. A couple of the straps are a little , tighter than I’m used to, that’s all. I’ll be all right.”

“If you say so. All right, we’d better get started. Everybody split up, and we’ll meet at the Pine Street apartments at ten thirty.”

“Why so late?” Jack asked.

“Security at the Wagner Building changes then,” Jenifer said. “We want to arrive just after they’ve finished their first round.”

One by one, the members of the group left until only Jack, Abbot, and Sally were left. “I’m sorry about Emily,” Sally said as they walked to the elevator together.

“What happened?” Abbot asked.

“Nothing at all,” Jack said.

“I think she’s in love with Marvin Dahlgren,” Sally explained.

“Sorry, Jack,” Abbot said. Jack just shrugged.

Traffic was light when they got to the street. By chance, Jack had parked just two cars behind Abbot, less than half a block away, so they walked together. A patrol car passed them going in the same direction, then suddenly turned into a space in front of them and stopped. Both front doors opened and two officers, one a lieutenant, got out.

“Just hold it right there,” the patrolman said, nervously fingering the flap of his holster. “Aren’t you Dr. Jack Page?”

Jack stared at him, completely taken by surprise.

The officers both drew their guns. The lieutenant was smiling. “You’re all three under arrest,” he said. “What’s the charge, officer?” Abbot asked politely. “Suspicion of murder,” the lieutenant said. “Espionage. Consorting with the enemy. ” He stood just off the curb while the patrolman came up to them and motioned them to go stand facing the wall. Jack thought about the package of explosives he was holding, and the two guns in his pockets.

Abbot and Sally, with their hands up, were moving very slowly, as if they weren't sure just what it was the patrolman wanted them to do. "Come *on*," the young officer said. "Get over there and put your hands up against the wall." Jack, taking his cue from his two companions, made to comply but did not hurry. Behind him, he heard the lieutenant speak into the patrol car's radio mike.

"LeGrange here," the lieutenant said. "Send a car to the corner of Laurel and Wade. We've got Jack Page."

Jack, by this time, had positioned himself as instructed, with Abbot and Sally to his left. The patrolman, still holding his gun, started frisking him down the left side. He found Jack's gun almost immediately. He tried to take it out of the jacket pocket, but the gun snagged on the fabric.

Abbot reacted at once. He pushed himself away from the wall, grabbed the patrolman by the front of his uniform, and threw him across the sidewalk into Lt. LeGrange, who was just then coming over to help. At the same moment, Sally started running toward a nearby alley entrance, and Jack belatedly followed, with Abbot right behind him.

One of the officers fired just as they reached the alley mouth. Abbot spun and, drawing his Visitor laser, took quick aim and fired. The shot passed between the two officers and struck the radiator of the patrol car, blowing the hood open. Then he sprinted into the alley after Jack and Sally, who were halfway to an L corner.

Sally careened around the corner, Jack pulled up short to look back while drawing his laser, and saw Abbot coming toward them at a full run. At the alley mouth, the two officers were standing with their arms extended. There were three or four shots and Abbot went down.

Jack fired back once, then turned to grab Sally, who was coming back to find out what had happened.

"Let me go," she cried, and half dragged him around the corner. The patrolman was just a dozen yards away, with his back to them, watching as Lt. LeGrange, standing over Abbot's body, pumped round after round into the fallen man.

Jack grabbed Sally as hard as he could without losing his hold on his gun, and pulled her back. She resisted for just a second, and then turned toward a recessed

door. It was unlocked, and they went through, closed it behind them, and found themselves in a commercial kitchen.

They hurried toward the swinging doors at the front of the kitchen, but when they went through they emerged into a service area instead of a restaurant as Jack had expected. Jack pulled Sally to the right, and they walked quickly up a back hallway toward the front of the building. Before they got there they passed another door on the right, and Jack opened it. Beyond was the mouth of the alley through which they had just come. They could see Abbot lying halfway to the L, beyond which they could hear the two officers running and trying doors. As quickly as they could, they left the alley, got into Jack's car, and as they drove off, Sally at last broke down.

File Twenty-five: Friday Night— Saturday Morning

They had nearly an hour to kill. Sally was sobbing hysterically, and Jack wasn't feeling too cheerful himself. To take them as far away from the scene of Abbot's murder as he could, he drove to the shopping center near the Berry Avenue house.

He found a parking place surrounded by other cars, and they sat there until Sally was able to gain some kind of control of herself. When she finally stopped crying they walked over to the McDonalds for a couple of cokes which they brought back to the car. They didn't talk, there wasn't much to say. At quarter after ten Jack pulled out of the parking lot and drove up to the apartment building on Pine.

Everybody else was already upstairs, and ready to go. "Where's Abbot?" Jenifer asked.

"Dead," Jack said. "Lt. LeGrange saw us on the street, just outside the office building, and tried to arrest us. We ran. Abbot was hit, and LeGrange shot him to death."

The room was silent with the shock of the news. Orson Strangways was the first one to break the spell.

"I'm not going with you tonight," he said.

"Why not?" Jack asked.

"Douglas Abbot was the only man I ever took orders from," Strangways said. "I'm not going to change that now. "

"Come on, Orson," Walter said. "We've got a job to do."

"I'm sorry."

“Orson’s right,” Samuel said. “Without Abbot, we’re lost.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Jack said. “There’s a whole city at stake.”

“To hell with it,” Jenifer said, struggling to control her emotion. She stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

“I can’t believe this,” Pedro said. “If we give up now, Abbot will have died for nothing.”

“If we try to *do* this job,” Strangways said, “we’ll *all* die for nothing. I wouldn’t trust anybody but Abbot to bring us out alive.”

“Or get us in alive,” Samuel said.

“You’re wrong,” Sally said, speaking for the first time since Abbot’s death. “And besides, there’s too much at stake—like Jack said, a whole city.”

“Freeport’s gotten through tougher times than this,” Strangways said.

“You’re wrong,” Sally said again. “I told you about these subliminal broadcasts. That’s what’s making you give up, that’s been making all of us less dedicated than we should be.”

“If it’s true,” Samuel said, “it might work on you, but what about me? Would that ELF stuff have the same effect on me and Walter as it does on humans?”

“You’re just frightened, Samuel,” Walter said.

“That’s true, frightened so much that I just can’t go through with it.” He and Strangways walked stiffly to the door. As they left, Jenifer came back in.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” she said, handing him the maps. Then she left again.

“Can we do it?” Walter asked. “Just the four of us?” “We know where it is,” Pedro said. “We’ve got enough explosives, I think.”

“We’ve got to do it,” Sally said. “If those ELF signals can make Jenifer give up, think what they’re doing to the rest of Freeport.”

“We can only die trying,” Jack said, “and once Annette breaks, if she hasn’t

already, we'll be as good as dead." "Then let's do it," Pedro said. "Even if we die trying, we'll mess up Dwight's scheme, maybe set him back enough so that somebody else can try to stop him." Jack was the only one with a car. As they drove toward the Wagner Building, everybody kept watch for police cars, and Jack avoided them whenever he could. At last they pulled into the underground garage below Freeport's tallest building. Using Jenifer's plans, they found a back entrance and went in.

File Twenty-six: Saturday Morning

It was a freight entrance, with corridors leading into the basements, and a double-wide elevator that worked only with a key. Sally took a small device like a calculator from the pocket of her blouse.

“This is one of Orson’s little tricks,” she said. She placed it against the elevator lock and touched several buttons on the device’s front. Numbers lit up on the LED display. She touched more buttons. The lock clicked, and they could hear the elevator, coming down.

The control panel inside the elevator had buttons for every floor except the one at the very top. They went up as high as they could. When the elevator stopped at last, the doors hissed open to reveal a broad, dimly lit service corridor.

There was a stairwell on either side of the elevator shaft.

The one on the right started there, and only went down. They took the other one up to the topmost floor, but it did not go to the loft space above it. They would have to find another way to the transmitter.

The corridor here was like the one on the floor below. The lights were dim, and it was very quiet. Jack checked the plans to find out where they were. Everything seemed to correspond so far.

“Let’s try this way,” Jack said, tracing a route on the plan that would lead them to the area where the ceiling access to the transmitter loft was symbolized.

They went, as quietly as possible, from the service corridor to a cross hallway, up that to a series of large rooms which were equipped in much the same way as the Fairfield studio had been but with more modem equipment, and from there to a public lobby, empty now, near the center of the building.

The access symbol was over against the far wall of this room, but the way to the loft above the top floor was not a pull-down ladder, as Jack had expected. Instead, there was a door marked “Stair.”

“It’s not the first thing they’ve changed,” Walter said softly as Sally tried the knob. “If they go up there a lot, it makes sense that they would replace the ladder to make it easier for them.”

Sally quickly got the door open. The stairs beyond went down as well as up. They started climbing, Jack and Walter right behind Sally. Then two armed Visitors appeared at the top of the stairs, their heavy weapons drawn.

“I’m sorry,” Pedro said from behind them, and Jack turned to see him with his gun drawn, too. “This is as far as you go.”

The guards above them started to descend. There was nothing they could do but return to the lobby. Pedro backed away, and was joined by two other guards, as heavily armed as those on the stairs.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” one of the guards beside Pedro said, “ever since you paid that visit to Hickory in Northampton.”

The four guards, with Pedro assisting, quickly searched Jack, Sally, and Walter, relieving them of their explosives, guns, and even pocket knives. They did not overlook the folded photocopies which Jack was still carrying in his inside jacket pocket.

“Let’s go down instead of up,” the guard who had spoken before said, gesturing to the stairwell. Another guard backed down ahead of them, and Pedro came down with the last.

At the floor below they were herded along several corridors to a small, stark office, containing only a desk. Behind the desk, Dwight sat with an expectant expression on his nordic face. Standing beside him was Lewis.

“Please come in,” Dwight said as they all crowded in front of the desk. “Only four?” He looked at Pedro, who holstered his gun. “Or three? I had thought there would be more of you.”

“There should have been,” Jack said.

“Yes, but then, Douglas Abbot, at least, has been accounted for. It would appear that his death did not deter you in any way.”

“Not at all,” Sally said.

Dwight chuckled. “Rather audacious of you,” he said, “to think you could get away with coming here like this.” “We got Emily Velasquez out of that prison of yours,” Jack reminded him.

“Indeed you did, and that was very well done, too. I have to admire you. The facility has been abandoned, of course. But then, it was not a very important facility in the first place, just a testing lab. We are far more careful about who comes and goes here.”

“They were better equipped this time,” one of the guards said, holding up one of the packages of explosives. “I think they were going to try to blow us up.”

“Ambitious, as well as audacious,” Dwight said, smiling as if he were amused.

Another guard put the folded and wrinkled photocopies down on the desk. Dwight opened them up and looked at them. “Miss Velasquez took more than three pictures,” he said.

“These were the only ones with you in them,” Jack answered, trying to keep his voice as light as Dwight’s.

“And there are copies,” Dwight went on.

“The originals are in a safe place,” Jack told him.

“So are the negatives. We found them in Miss Velasquez’ darkroom at her office, almost immediately. And we’ll find the originals, too.”

“I don’t think so,” Jack said. “You haven’t subverted everybody. ”

“Perhaps not just yet, but we will have, shortly. Our experiment has been proving highly successful. And if you’re here, with explosives, and trying to get into the loft above the top floor, then I can only assume that you have a rather good idea of what that experiment involves.”

“Subliminal messages superimposed on TV broadcasts,” Jack said.

“I think you know more than that,” Dwight told him. “You’ve proven too

dangerous an opponent for me to risk underestimating you.” He smiled again, and Jack felt the irony of his capture only too clearly. “But I wonder,” Dwight went on, “just how much do you really know?”

“Not as much as I’d like,” Jack said. “I know you took advantage of Vanessa Carpentier, when she built your Northampton studio for you, to pump her of everything she knew about subliminal broadcasting and multiple signal transmission. And I know you’ve been augmenting your broadcasts from here by using ELF in some way. The details are hardly important at this point. What I don’t know, and what I have never understood, is what Vincent Kline, or Charles Anthony Oswald have to do with all this.”

“It’s really not that mysterious,” Dwight said, “and you’re so close to the answer I’m surprised you can’t see it. Between them, Kline and Oswald represent almost the entire power structure of Freeport. And it’s that power structure that I intend to turn to my—to Northampton’s advantage.”

“You have to understand,” Lewis said. “Freeport is the only wholly human controlled city of any size in our part of the country. The red dust keeps us away from the industrialized north. Freeport’s very existence is an insult to us. I always felt ambivalent about living here, even when I was out of favor and branded as a traitor.”

“You don’t know how many times,” Dwight said, “some overly ambitious young officer has suggested that we just invade Freeport, take it over by force. They fail to realize the significance of the balance of power between our two peoples. If Lewis finds Freeport’s existence an insult, we know all too well that your government in the northern part of the country finds it a source of pride. If I—or anybody in Northampton—tried to simply invade, there would be retaliations from your people, and censure from ours for endangering the uneasy truce that now exists between us in this part of the country.”

“So you’re using subliminal subversion instead,” Jack said.

“Exactly. We simply send extra low frequency signals on a weak carrier wave that exactly matches the broadcast frequencies of the TV stations that can be received in Freeport. Properly tuned, ELF signals can directly influence the minds of the viewers. For over a year now we’ve tested hundreds of people in our Bay Shore facility, finding out just what kind of ELF signals produce what

effects.” “Abbot was right,” Sally said. “It’s mind control.” “Of a sort. We can’t put a specific thought into a viewer’s mind. If we could, we could control the whole world tomorrow.

“But what we can do is nearly as effective. Certain ELF frequencies, for example, enhance suggestibility, open up psychological channels to the deep subconscious. This allows us to use more prosaic subliminal techniques more effectively. They can be briefer, and still be perceived; more subtle, but more precisely understood. And the viewers believe the message, when they see it.”

“It’s ironic,” Lewis said. “It’s the message we’ve been using all along—‘The Visitors Are Your Friends.’” “You’ve got to be kidding,” Sally said. “What can you hope to accomplish with a dumb idea like that?”

“Ask Dr. Page,” Dwight said. “Ask him how many of his ‘clients’ have stopped complaining of ‘Alien Anxiety Syndrome.’”

“Almost all of them,” Jack said. “I became aware of it just recently, but it started happening about a month ago.” “If you could check your records,” Dwight said. “I think you would find that the first signs of improvement started

almost exactly six weeks ago, when we started broadcasting from here.”

“That would also explain,” Sally said quietly, “why so many of our people seem to have lost heart in the resistance.”

“Of course it does,” Dwight said. “Why resist somebody who’s only trying to be your friend?”

“But that can’t be enough,” Walter objected. “If you *really* wanted to be friendly, sure, but you don’t want that.” “You’re right,” Dwight said. “It’s too little, too late. If we’d had this system when we first landed three years ago, and taken a more leisurely approach with the initial phases of our invasion to give it time to work, we would have had the whole planet eating out of our hands. Humans were already favorably disposed towards us, and there would have been no resistance at all by the time we were ready to move in earnest. Now, of course, this subliminal seduction is only a part of a much larger effort. And if we are successful here, it will do me,” he glanced up at Lewis, “and the rest of us, a lot of good.”

“This larger effort,” Jack said. “That’s where Kline and Oswald fit in.”

“Exactly. Of course, they are not aware that they are helping us with our plans. Their pursuit of their own selfish interests are playing right into our hands. Freeport is notorious throughout your part of the country for its crime, its powerful underworld, its political corruption. It kept you free of us before, but without that now, no matter how effective my transmissions and their messages might be, I would be powerless to take over Freeport.

“What I need,” he went on after a glance at Lewis, “if Northampton is to take control of Freeport, is for the people of Freeport to ask our help.”

“They’ll never do it,” Sally said.

“Oh, but they will. Freeport will find itself in a situation so bad that it cannot cope, cannot get itself out of trouble, and must ask for help from whoever is most handy—and that, of course, is Northampton.”

“That would explain your interest in Kline,” Sally went on. “You’re encouraging his crime, helping him make our lives miserable.”

“You’re very perceptive,” Dwight said, “though Kline may see it in a subtly different way. He just thinks he’s doing me favors. After all, I started doing ‘favors’ for him long ago, he’s just repaying them. During the last two years, Kline and his organization have come to depend on me—for dope, tools, weapons, communications, hideouts, and so on. Sometimes they pay me in money. I prefer payment in favors.”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” Lewis said, looking down at Dwight. “What do you do with all that money?” “I used it,” Dwight said, “to finance this studio, and this whole operation. I thought it a lot better to use these humans’ dirty money against themselves than to tax the resources of our own people. Doesn’t the irony of that please you, Lewis? But the money is just a convenience. It wasn’t really necessary. It is the favors that Kline owes me, that he’s grown accustomed to doing for me, that will make this operation work.

“Because Kline has contacts on the police force, in government, in the trades and unions. And Kline is not afraid to force favors in return from them, favors which I might suggest to him. At my request, Kline has used his friends to put certain people in key places, and has corrupted others. Oh, don’t misunderstand me,

Freeport would have been corrupt enough without my intervention.

Freeport was already rotten before I began to adjust things to my satisfaction. But today, with a few notable exceptions, Freeport is not just corrupt but is so in a way that will prove useful to me.

“Because, you see, I have absolutely no direct influence on Freeport’s government at all. No matter how venal, how ignorant, how self-serving, they would never tolerate any interference from a Visitor. The few potential collaborators among them would be quickly found out and silenced.

“But the mob is not so fastidious. And that is why I work through them.”

“You seem,” Jack said, “to get along with Oswald pretty well.”

“You know nothing about it,” Dwight said. “Oswald objects to me a great deal. He thinks I want to share his power. That’s not true, but why disillusion him. At the same time, he is envious of Kline’s relationship with me, and that makes him vulnerable. On the one hand he’s afraid I’ll supplant him somehow. On the other he’s covetous of the favors I do for Kline. His uncertainty and confusion, along with his greed and fear, put him right where I want him.

“He thinks he’s hard, but he’s soft. His reputation notwithstanding, he’s been touched. Not by me, not directly. But he has his weaknesses, and these have been fed and encouraged, by Kline, at my urging. It’s a kind of insurance. If Oswald were to try to denounce me, reveal what little he knows of my activities, he would have to face an investigation into his own activities, and he knows that his secrets, his special weaknesses would certainly be discovered. ”

“Why are you telling us all this?” Sally asked.

“Sheer ego, Miss Greenstreet. And because I get a certain amount of satisfaction out of making you uncomfortable. Think about this. Organized crime and city government, no matter how intertwined, are at bottom natural enemies. But look what I have done in the last two years. I have used crime to soften up government, which naturally has the upper hand, and I’ve used government to bolster crime, thus striking an unnatural balance.”

“Just for the fun of it,” Jack said.

“Absolutely not. There are very practical consequences. When I give the word, and it will be very soon now, Kline and his mob will make a play for complete freedom, complete control of the economic elements on which he depends. There will be assassinations, revelations, black-mailings, a general upsurge in street crime, a calling to accounts of all the favors he’s paid over the years.

“It will be futile, of course. He doesn’t know that, though I have encouraged him. He sees himself as the baron of a feudal state. It can’t happen, not even here.

“What will happen is this. As soon as Kline moves, the police and the government will retaliate. After all, they *are* the barons of this feudal state, and they don’t want their power structure threatened. And where does that leave Kline? Doing exactly what they seek to prevent, threatening the existing power structure by revealing its corruption— more assassinations, officials exposed to force their removal, others called on to pay back favors, and so on. He’ll have committed himself too far to back off.

“And Freeport’s government won’t be able to back off either. All hell will break loose. The government, exposed to the population as the rotten thing it is, will fall. The few uncorrupted officials will not be able to prevent it. The citizenry will turn its back on the government, and Kline will be unstoppable.

“But Kline’s victory will be his undoing. Without a government to vampirize, without trade, commerce, other sources of community income, what can he steal? Kline and his organization will start to hurt within a very short time. That is critical. The time must be short, and it will be. There will be an undeclared but open war between the establishment and the underworld, and if it can be brought to a head quickly enough, it will bring all of Freeport to the brink of a social collapse that could well leave this city a ghost town. ” “That’s an awfully elaborate scheme,” Sally said, “if you just want to drive us away.”

“That’s not what he wants at all,” Jack said. “If it were, the war would already have started, and he’d be fueling both sides.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Dwight said. “What I want is a sudden and sharp panic among the general population. I want the mass of the citizenry to reject both Kline, and Oswald and what he represents. I want those few good men in government to become desperate, not to despair and give up. When this war

errupts, I want them and the average citizen to see a chance of restoring peace. Which they will.”

“With a little help from you,” Jack said.

“Exactly. Northampton has established a reputation for law and order.’ We have no crime in Northampton.” “Not counting the fifth column,” Walter said.

“Of course not. It’s invisible. And who else would Freeport turn to? The United States Military, such as it is now, is too far away. Another city? Another police force? There’s only Northampton.

“I’ll step in,” he said, glancing up at Lewis, “along with other officials from Northampton, in friendly response to Freeport’s loud and public request for aid. And we’ll set things to rights. By the time anybody anywhere else begins to act, either to save Freeport or to stop us from interfering, it will be too late. We’ll have complete control of the city— a bit damaged, perhaps, but intact, and not abandoned. Neither your human politics nor our bureaucracy will be able to touch us. Given a *fait accompli*, our bureaucracy will back us one hundred percent, and human government will be helpless.”

Dwight stood up, and Lewis moved to the side to give him room. Dwight flexed his shoulders, stretched his arms in a comfortable and familiar way, as if he were talking among friends.

“It’s getting late,” he said. “Pedro, I commend you on your infiltration into this dangerous group. And on your quick action. Had you not assisted in their capture, these three might have been killed, and I would have been denied the not inconsiderable satisfaction of this little discussion.

“But I have indulged myself perhaps a bit too much already. Guards, take them away.”

File Twenty-seven: Saturday Morning

Jack, Sally, and Walter were taken, still handcuffed, to a large but unfurnished office on the same floor, and there left. After a moment of silence, Walter started cursing in his own tongue.

“Can you get these handcuffs off?” Jack asked, interrupting the flow of invective.

“Sorry,” Walter said, “it’s just that I brought Pedro into the organization, and into this job. Stand back to back with me.” Jack did so. In a moment he was free.

“Just push on that large button,” Walter said, presenting his cuffed hands to Jack, “and twist the joint between the two cables to the right.” The metallic bonds went limp and slid off his wrists. Jack did the same with Sally’s cuffs, and they were free.

“It’s locked, of course,” Walter said, rattling the handle of the only door. “Why didn’t he just kill us out of hand?” “Because we can tell him things Annette can’t,” Jack suggested. “This scheme of his depends on everything working at just the right time. The resistance, and the fifth column, could still thwart his plans.”

“He’ll get what he wants from Pedro, damn him. He had me completely fooled. How could I have been so stupid.” “It’s not all your fault,” Jack told him. “Remember, I trusted Lewis, and look where he is now, standing at Dwight’s right hand.”

“Turning Annette in must have gotten him a lot of brownie points,” Sally said.

“But he wouldn’t have done that,” Jack said, “if he hadn’t been a loyalist all along.”

“Like Pedro,” Walter said, “just waiting for the right moment.”

“Their timing was pretty damn good,” Sally said. “And what are we going to do now? What the hell does it matter, anyway? If there’s that much crime and

corruption in Freeport, then maybe we deserve to be taken over by Northampton.”

“No,” Walter said, “that’s not the way it is at all. Oh, sure, Freeport is rotten but Dwight’s been working on the city for two years. He’s taken every advantage, magnified every weakness, amplified every fault. Without Dwight and his machinations, Freeport would be no worse than many other cities have been before we came.”

“But now—” Sally started to say.

“Even now,” Jack said, “without Dwight’s mastery of subliminal TV propaganda, his scheme wouldn’t stand a chance. ”

“Yes, but he’d done it, he’d gotten to the whole city—”

“He has, but it’s not Freeport’s fault, it’s not our fault. As bad as we are, we do not *deserve* what’s going to happen to us.”

“But, dammit—” Sally started to say when the door opened.

It was Pedro. He stood in the doorway, his gun drawn, looking from one to the other.

“Come to gloat?” Walter asked sarcastically.

“Not yet,” Pedro said, his voice quiet. “You should be glad I acted so quickly, and as I did. You heard Dwight, if we’d put up any show of resistance whatsoever, we’d all have been shot down.”

“Well,” Sally said, “you certainly saved your life, didn’t you?”

“And yours,” Pedro said.

“So what do you expect us to do,” Walter asked, “thank you? I’d rather be shot dead then subjected to the interrogation that’s in store for us.”

“There needn’t be any interrogation,” Pedro said.

“You’re just going to shoot us,” Sally said.

“I’m not doing it, am I? You can’t reveal anything about me that Dwight can’t find out in his own way. And if I just wanted you to be caught, I wouldn’t have to be here at all right now. I took a chance, back there at the stair, I’m going to take another one.” He turned his gun around and handed it to Walter.

Walter took the gun suspiciously, his eyes boring into Pedro’s, his fingers working at the trigger.

“What I want,” Pedro said, “is to finish the job we started. If you let me live, I mean to see that we do just that.”

“I guess,” Walter said, “it was a pretty clever move on your part after all.” He gave Pedro back his gun.

“About those photos,” Pedro said, holstering his weapon, “how safe are they really?”

“I mailed them to a guy named David Mallard,” Jack said. “He’s one of those uncorrupted exceptions Dwight mentioned.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Walter said, “and I think you’re right. If we can expose this plot of Dwight’s, then Mallard should be able to clean up the rest of the mess.”

“That is to be hoped,” Pedro said. He went to the door and looked out into the hall. “I know where the explosives and guns are.”

“Then let’s move,” Jack said.

Pedro led them through deserted corridors to another office where their weapons and demolition equipment had been unceremoniously dumped on a desk. But before they could rearm themselves, an inner door opened and Lewis came out, carrying one of the heavy guard weapons.

“Just take it very easy,” he said, “and you’ll all live another hour.”

“Another stray sheep returned to the fold?” Walter asked.

“Yes, but you misunderstand. My fold is my people, not you. I thought Pedro

was a little too good to be true.” He turned his heavy weapon on Pedro and fired, but the shot missed. Jack and Walter grabbed their guns from the desk and both fired at once, striking Lewis in the face and chest. His gun went off again, into the desk, and then he fell.

“If anybody’s nearby,” Walter said, “they’ll have heard that.” He picked up a package of explosives. Sally grabbed her gun and the other three packets, then they hurried from the room.

They found their way back to the stair where they had been captured, but when they reached the top they found that it had been bricked over. They couldn’t get up into the transmitter loft this way after all.

“Now what?” Pedro asked. Walter took out the floorplan and examined it quickly.

“From what this shows,” he said, “and from what we’ve seen, I’d guess that their main studio is over here.” He pointed to a large space further toward the front of the building. “If that’s true,” he went on, “it would make sense for them to have a direct means of access between the studio and the transmitter, don’t you think?”

“That symbol,” Sally said, pointing to a crossed rectangle near the edge of the supposed studio. “That’s not quite the same as the one here, but it could be a stair or ladder, I suppose.”

“The only thing to do,” Jack said, “is to go and find out.”

The large room did in fact prove to be a broadcast studio. It was so packed with heavy electronic equipment that the doorway by which they had entered was partially concealed from the rest of the room. They did not go in all the way, however, but hesitated a moment, hearing voices coming from within.

Jack dropped to his knees and cautiously peered around the corner of a large, gray metal cabinet. The center of the room was clear, surrounded by consoles, desks, large videotape drives, and other equipment only Abbot would have recognized. A half dozen technicians sat at various consoles, and four guards stood at their ease where they could see everything but not be in the way.

As Jack watched, Dwight came into view from one side and went to one of the

technicians. “How’s the signal strength on channel eleven?” he asked.

“Back within subliminal limits,” the technician answered. “As far as the viewers were concerned, it was just a mild static.”

“Fine,” Dwight said, and went to another technician.

“Bring the frequency down two points,” he said, “then back up again when the comedy comes on.” He moved on to another console. “Any further interference on twenty-eight?” he asked.

“None,” the technician answered. “Just a line leak, I think.”

Jack inched back around the corner and looked up at his three companions. Walter nodded, Sally took a deep breath, Pedro smiled. Jack got to his feet. “Now,” he said.

The four of them sprang from concealment, guns leveled. “Hands up everybody,” Jack snapped. The technicians just turned to stare, half frozen at their consoles, but two of the four guards tried to draw their weapons. They were burned down before their guns cleared their holsters. One of the technicians, caught in the crossfire, fell from his chair. The other two guards raised their hands. It was only then that Jack noticed that Dwight was nowhere in sight.

“Where did he go?” Sally asked.

“Never mind him,” Jack said. “We’ve got work to do.”

Jack and the others ripped wires from the electronic equipment surrounding them, sometimes causing showers of sparks, and used the wires to bind the five technicians and two surviving guards. The sixth technician, lying by his console, was unconscious but still living. They left him there.

Using whatever came to hand—chairs, phones, gun butts—Jack, Walter, and Pedro smashed as much of the equipment as they could, toppling cabinets, ripping out more wires. Sally, in the meantime, was trying to locate the access to the transmitter loft as indicated on the floorplan.

“I found it,” she called after what seemed a frighteningly long time. She was pushing a freestanding set of lockers to one side. Behind it was a narrow

stairway, going up.

They emerged in a vast, cavernous space, lit by only occasional bare bulbs in industrial reflectors. The ceiling was low, but there were no walls, just columns reaching up to support the roof, the tops of the elevator shafts, and other structural elements. Something glittered in the distance, toward the center of the area. They went to it.

Here, scattered around the concrete pillars supporting the mast that rose above the roof of the Wagner Building, were shiny new and powerful transmitters, control panels, and other electronics, connected by cables and busses to the base of the mast, and to newly installed connector plates in the unfinished floor.

They didn't have enough explosives to go around. All they could do, moving as quickly as they could, was put charges on the largest pieces of equipment, paying special attention to one device that looked like it might be a central unit, and to the base of the mast.

When all the charges were in place, they set their detonators, tying as many together as they could. They set the timers for one hour, and on Jack's signal, started them all at once.

There was no time to lose. They hurried back to the stairs, and down to the studio below. Everything was as they had left it. They went to the door by which they had come in, but as Jack, in the lead, stepped out into the hall beyond, he was greeted by a fusillade of laser fire. His jacket was seared, and one shot took the gun out of his hand. Walter and Sally were so close behind him he almost wasn't able to duck back through the door and out of range.

They retreated to the middle of the studio, where Jack picked up one of the guard's guns. The door, still half concealed behind the cabinet of electronics, burst open and red-uniformed Visitors came charging in. They all went down under the withering fire of the four saboteurs.

"We've got to find a back way out," Walter said, moving to a place of better concealment in anticipation of the next assault.

"There isn't any," Sally said, "unless we want to go back up to the transmitters."

"Dwight's secret exit," Pedro said. "Did anybody see which way he went?"

There was no time for an answer, laser shots buzzed into the studio from the still-open door. Beyond, the guards and soldiers were more careful now, not charging but firing from cover. Jack, using the heavier weapon, blasted the cabinet that concealed the door, and it exploded in a shower of sparks and a rush of black smoke.

Sally grabbed one of the bound technicians, but he was dead, caught in the friendly fire from the doorway. Another technician, wounded, spat venom at her as she tried to approach him.

“There’s somebody missing,” Jack said suddenly, and looked frantically around the room. At the door, more guards were clearing away the wreckage.

“What are you talking about,” Walter cried.

“There he is,” Pedro said, pointing to the far wall. They could see black-booted feet just disappearing behind a rack of electronics as the one unbound technician pulled himself across the floor and out of sight.

A laser shot from the doorway speared between Jack and Sally. Their return fire drove their attackers back for a moment. Pedro was already running toward the equipment rack, with Walter close behind him. By the time Jack and

Sally got there, the two fifth columnists had caught the technician, just as he was about to close a sliding panel at the top of the set of steep, narrow, newly built stairs.

They pulled the wounded technician to his feet. “He knows the way,” Pedro said. Holding the technician securely, Pedro and Walter descended the stairs, with Jack and Sally on their heels. There was a door at the bottom, and they burst through into darkness.

Then lights came on, blindingly. Jack threw his arm up over his eyes.

“It’s all over,” he heard Dwight say.

He lowered his arm to see six Visitor guards, facing them like a firing squad, with Dwight standing happily behind them.

File Twenty-eight: Saturday Morning

Jack expected the six guards to open fire at any instant, but they just kept their weapons trained and did not shoot. Walter and Pedro let the wounded technician drop. The man fell to the floor, and one of the guards slung his gun from his belt so that he could drag the technician out of the way.

Jack dropped his gun on the floor, and the other three saboteurs did likewise. Two of the guards grabbed Pedro, jerked him to one side, searched him quickly and thoroughly, then cuffed his hands behind him before putting him back with his friends.

It was Walter's turn next, and then Sally. The guards had no qualms about searching a woman. Jack got the same treatment.

Only then did the other guards lower their weapons. Two of the guards picked up the wounded technician and carried him off while the other four prodded Jack and his friends, forcing them to follow Dwight through another room, into a corridor, and then into the office where he had spoken to them such a short while ago. Two of the guards came in with them, and took places on either side of Dwight's desk.

Dwight seemed very calm and rather happy as he went to sit behind his desk. He leaned back and looked the four of them over.

"Well, Pedro," he said. "I was wondering where you really stood. Didn't you think that I accepted your betrayal of your friends just a little too readily?"

Pedro did not answer. He just turned his face away. "Northampton," Walter said, "certainly ought to be pleased with you."

"Northampton knows nothing about this," Dwight said. "With the political situation the way it is in the rest of the country, they would never have allowed me to perform this little experiment of mine."

"You asked them, I suppose," Jack said sarcastically. "Indeed I did. I went to my superiors two years ago with an early version of my plan. But even then they

were cowards. Northampton was much more vulnerable then, of course. But Freeport was also a softer target. Today, if they had any idea of what I was up to, they would demote me and transfer me, at the very least. They are so concerned with preserving the status quo that even the remotest possibility of you humans finding out about my work with ELF and subliminal persuasion would make them panic. Not without cause, of course. If word did leak out to the northern states, what's left of your federal government could make things very uncomfortable for us in Northampton. And elsewhere. There was considerable risk to this experiment, but it was a risk I thought I should take. I think you can understand why I was so concerned when I discovered that Miss Velasquez had actually taken pictures of me with Kline and Oswald, right here in Freeport. I dared not let any word, any hint of my business here get into the public eye."

"That's something you still have to worry about," Jack said.

"Not anymore," Dwight told him. "I'm almost ready to move. Those photos cannot be a threat to me, no matter where they are. Before they can be made public, before anything can be done about them, my experiment will be finished."

"And what about Kline and Oswald?" Sally asked. "Just feed them to the wolves?"

"Why not? By the time I start them moving, they'll be too busy fighting each other to pay any attention to public opinion. There just isn't—"

"Excuse me," a technician said from the doorway.

"Not now," Dwight said snapped.

"The studio's destroyed," the technician said hastily, half backing out the door.

Dwight came slowly the rest of the way to his feet. His annoyance faded into a look of disbelief, and then unhuman rage. He took the gun from the guard standing at his right, grinned, and shot Pedro through the head, then shot Walter the same way. The technician, still in the doorway, flinched.

The rage went out of Dwight at once. "Damn, I shouldn't have done that," he said as he handed the startled guard back his weapon. "They could have told me a lot more about the fifth column than Annette did before she died." He sat back

down. “But that’s just a nuisance, now,” he said. He looked at the technician. “Drag those two traitors out of here,” he commanded.

“Yes, sir,” the man said and stooped down to grab Walter clumsily by one leg.

“Not that way,” the guard on Dwight’s left snapped. He slung his weapon from his belt and went to give the frightened technician a hand. He picked Pedro up under the arms, and started to drag him out the door. The technician tried to imitate him, but Walter was too much for him, so the other guard went to his assistance.

“I want them burned,” Dwight shouted after them.

“I don’t often lose control that way,” he went on when the guards and bodies were gone. “And I won’t do it again. You two know too much to be wasted like that. You will be interrogated, at great length, and when you have told me everything you know, right down to your secret vices and the names of your grade-school playmates . . he paused to smile. “Then you will still be of some use. I happen to have developed a taste for human flesh.”

Sally gagged.

“You eat your own, too?” Jack asked. He didn’t really care what happened to his body after he was dead.

“No, Dr. Page, we are not cannibals. But there’s no hurry. Before you die, I want you to observe the fruits of my efforts. You may not find the thought of winding up on my table as distressing as Miss Greenstreet obviously does, but I think that witnessing my total subjugation of the entire population of Freeport will be a little less easy for you to stomach. And I will get considerable satisfaction from that.

“Because, you see, once my plan goes into effect, I will become the chief administrator of Freeport, at first under the provisional government, and then permanently. I will be in *charge*, not just some third rank official. Freeport will be *my* city, to do with as *I* please.”

He came around the desk and stood right in front of Jack.

“Because it will have been my plan, my effort and sacrifice, that brought

Freeport under Visitor control. My superiors will have to acknowledge me then, admit that my ELF broadcasts are efficacious. And Freeport will be a far better city to hold than Northampton, because I'll keep using my subliminal broadcasts, and the humans of Freeport will cooperate with me, instead of resisting, or sullenly complying. Every human in Freeport will be my willing slave." Jack wanted to lash out at the alien, regardless of the consequences, but his hands, real and false, were still shackled. Dwight laughed at his abortive, clumsy movement, but Jack felt a thrill run through him. The strap that had been torn in his fight with Marty Patrushka finally gave way. The prosthesis, no longer firmly fastened to the stump of his left upper arm, slid an inch down its sleeve.

"I thought I could get to you," Dwight was saying, a nasty smile on his sardonic nordic face. "You may not fear for yourself, but you do care about Freeport, don't you?" "I'm going to kill you," Jack said. He grabbed his left wrist in his right hand and gave the false arm a tug. The loose buckles gave way.

"You may certainly try," Dwight said, laughing at Jack's struggles.

And then the prosthetic arm slid down and out of the sleeve, and even as Dwight noticed the sudden and peculiar emptying of the sleeve, Jack swung the arm clear and brought it around as hard as he could. The metal and plastic prosthesis, powered by Jack's nearly double-strength right arm, smashed into the side of Dwight's head, ripping away false face, false hair, exposing reptilian features below, splattering green blood across the room.

Dwight staggered back, and made a half turn toward his desk. Jack swung the prosthesis again, crashing with a sound of breaking plastic and bone into the back of Dwight's head. Dwight slumped to his knees, reaching across the desk toward an intercom panel. Jack stepped up and clubbed him again—and again, and again, until Dwight, his head a soft pulp, slid off the desk and onto the floor.

"Oh God, oh God," Sally moaned. Jack turned to her, still holding the false arm, turned her around, and undid the handcuffs on her wrists. Sally turned back and, her hands shaking, managed to free Jack from his ruined left arm.

"A damn good nine thousand dollar prosthesis shot to hell," Jack said as he let the ruined arm fall. He grabbed Sally by the shoulders and strode with her to the door, where she fumbled at the handle.

“Come on,” he said, “those timers are going to go off any minute now.”

She got the door open at last and they rushed down the corridor, toward the central elevators. The elevator doors were actually open, the car waiting, when they got there.

“No,” Jack said as Sally started to enter. “When the charges go, they’ll blow out the elevator cables too.”

He threw his shoulder against the stairwell door, and it sprang open. With Sally right behind him, he started racing down. Just as they passed the third landing, the building jerked under their feet. Falling chips of concrete, and a prolonged shaking just made them go faster.